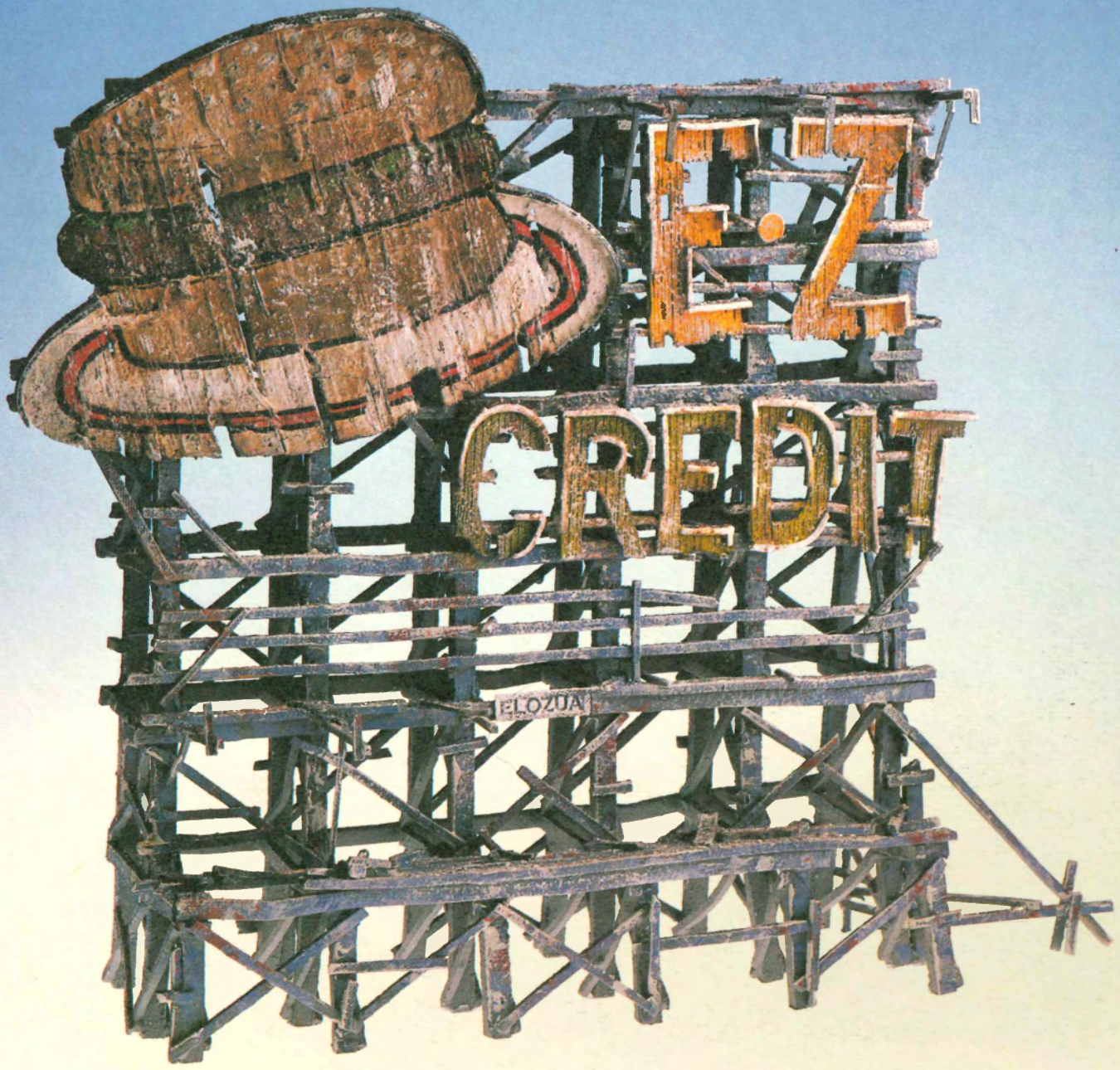
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Peter Voulkos *Untitled Vessel* 1956

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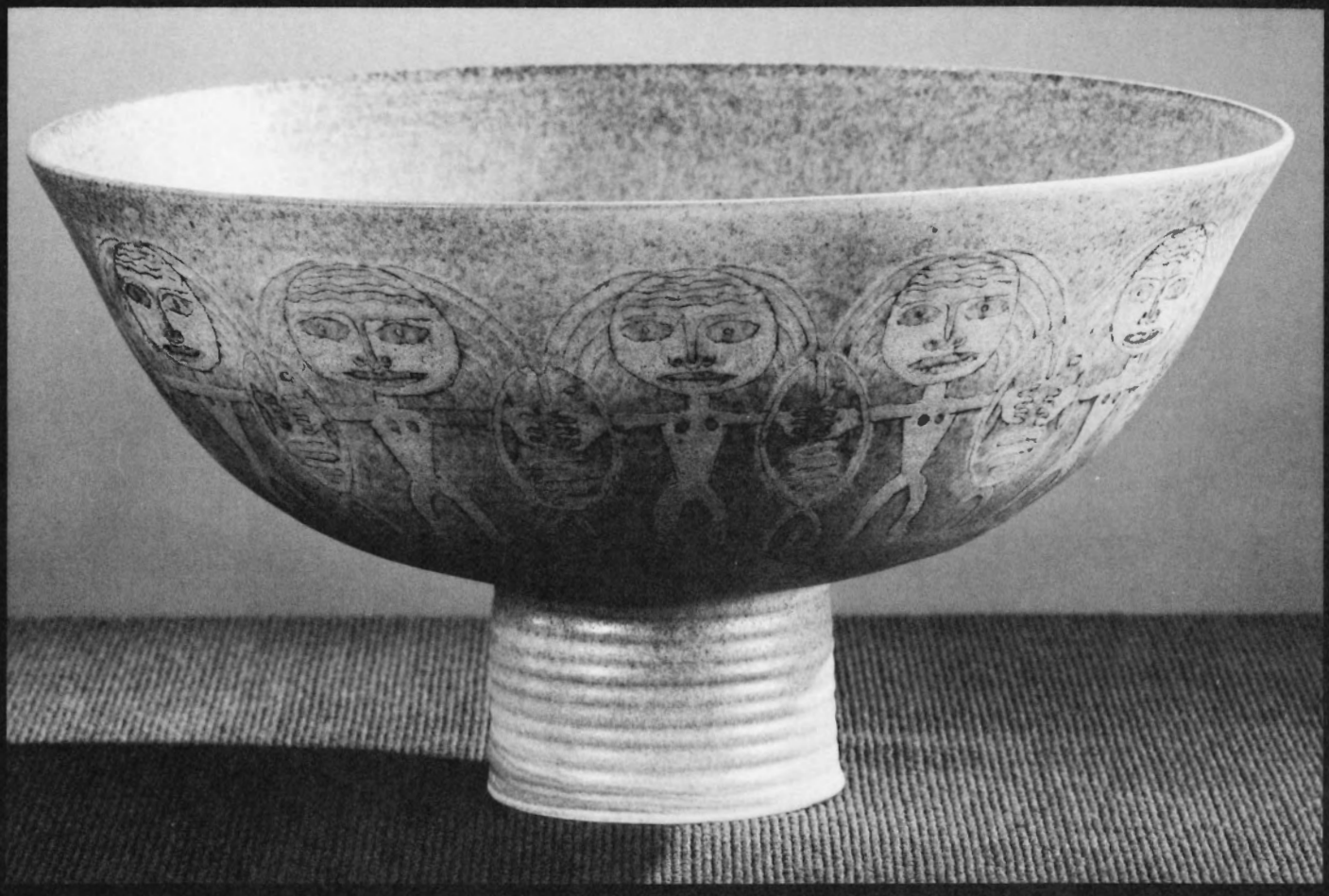

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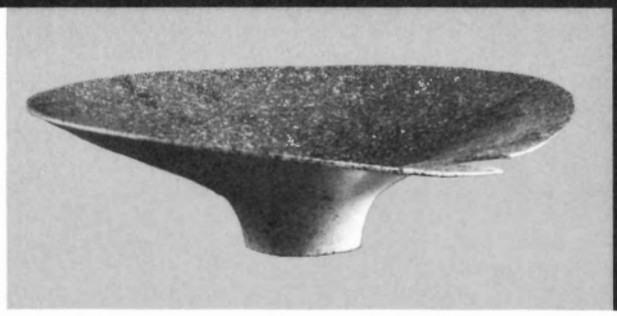

CARTWRIGHT

Virginia Cartwright
Stoneware
5 and 7 inches high

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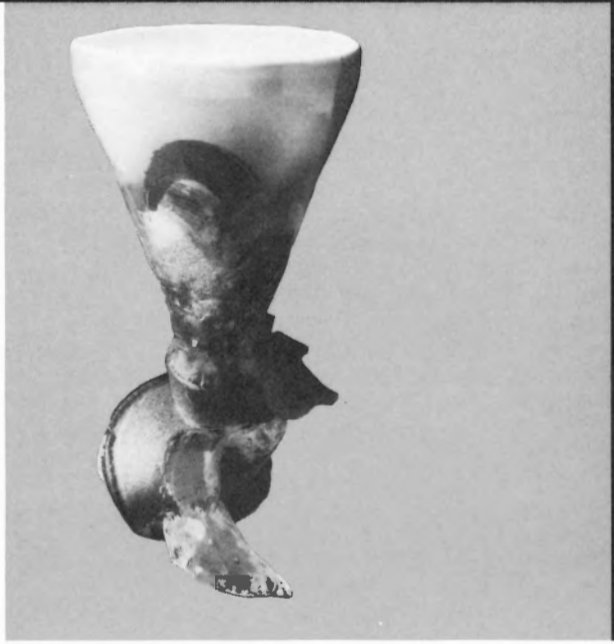


Toby Buonagurio

Thomas Piché

"Clay is a medium inherent with permissions of form and process," noted one art critic recently.[1] It is this very permissiveness that allows Toby Buonagurio to pursue her chosen range of ceramic sculpture: mechanized spacemen, metamorphosed shoes, phosphorescent flamingos, and souped-up jalopies. Her brand of imagery is rooted in pinball machine illustrations and dimestore knicknacks, yet each piece reveals the artist's own private vision of our modern era. The homey world of the kitsch chatchka is taken to surreal lengths by Buonagurio. With the aid of metallic luster glazes, neon colors, glitter, and flocking, she is able to transform comfortably familiar objects into bizarre relics of a future time.

While one might feel the urge to place Buonagurio's *Bionic Flamingos* atop the family TV set, an overriding sense of artistry prevents us from assigning them such a decorative role. For all their fancifulness, these objects exhibit impeccable virtuosity: a sure handling of the medium, a sophisticated sense of design, and a keen eye for the artifacts of popular culture. Her work provides a summary of modern decorative trends: Art Deco; 1940s Moderne, and Pop Art. Buonagurio mixes and recombines these aesthetics to arrive at a style that is totally her own. A hallmark of this ceramic sculpture is the conveyance of plugged-in energy, of electricity—they appear to glow from an internal power source. We become infected by this quality; we're jolted by one piece after another.

Among Buonagurio's most successful ventures have been her robot series and a more recent exploration of shrines. *Four-Legged Robot with Tail* is a tightly structured, highly elaborate piece of ceramic engineering. Covered with acrylic paint, metallic glaze, flocking, and glitter, this futuristic, mechanical monster seems to have walked right off the pages of a science-fiction comic book. The attention paid to detail in the *Four-Legged Robot* is incredible. Each segment of this creature's carapace appears to have been secured in place by the series of tiny metallic bolts, screws, and hinges that decorate its surface. The effective placement of polished surface against flat color animates the robot—it seems crouched and ready to attack. The day-glo coloration of its armor plates is fitting camouflage for our neon urban settings.

In such constructions as *Paradise Shrine* and *Double Reliquary,* Buonagurio summarizes many of the techniques, forms, and imagery that appear in her other creations. But more than that, these two objects seem to possess an iconic quality that overrides the whimsy and lightheartedness of her earlier work. *Paradise Shrine* is a futuristic idol that both dazzles and puzzles: two sinuous flamingos, in shades of purple and red, join company with three golden skulls. Together, they stand guard over a small reliquary containing an unknown object wrapped in gauze and decorated with a gold tassel. Artificial daisies have been placed at the shrine, as if by a devotee. *Paradise Shrine* is composed in almost perfect bilateral symmetry, and within that framework is a careful balancing of chevrons, angular plant forms, and soft curves. The colors are garish—bright orange and black predominate—while touches of purple, red, turquoise, and gold help create a palette of cacophonous tones. Though Buonagurio's stylized, expressionistic forms are capable of supporting the dissonant, aggressive colors, their interaction tends to suppress the object's inherent three dimensionality. The overall effect is flat, linear, graphic.

Obviously, Buonagurio's work is eye catching. This vibrancy is achieved not only by juxtaposing bright colors, however, but by contrasting surfaces—the faceted light of glitter against the sensuousness of flocking, the hard glare of metallic luster against the softness of matt airbrush.

We are also drawn to this work by its iconic mystery. Its depth-defying flatness, bilateral symmetry, and frontal orientation alert us to the compositional conventions of religious art. They seem to be the totems of some unknown future cult, the props of some unseen ritual. Forms and patterns repeat, aiding our apprehension of their representational elements. Invariably, all these characteristics come together to form a question in our minds—a shrine to whom or what?

It's as if some future generation had unearthed the discarded artifacts of our own civilization and, ignorant of their original function, had combined them to form a monument to a distant, unknown past. Could it be that Buonagurio, too, is seeking to create a monument to a popular culture that few of us see as clearly as she? A shrine, perhaps, to the halcyon days of vacation curio shops and amusement-park trophies, or to several decades of American middle-class taste and decoration.

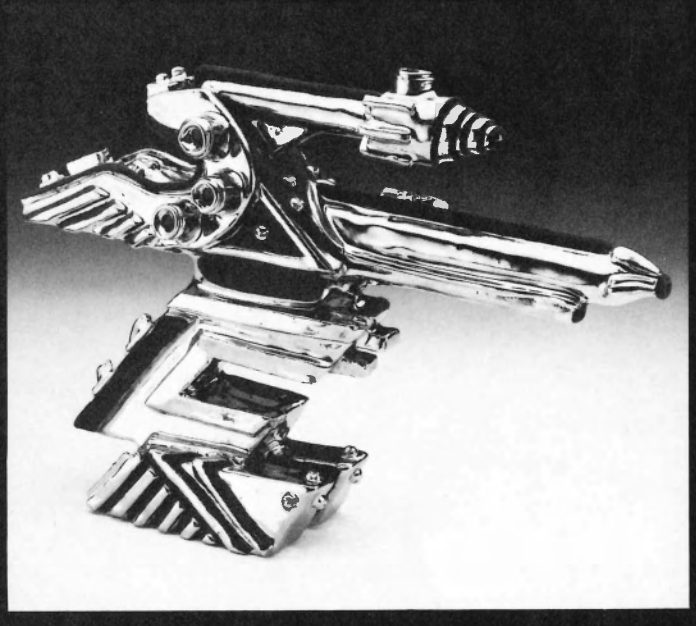
Ludicrous in conception, startling in execution, Toby Buonagurio's spirited sculptures are endowed with a rare ability to bemuse, while totally amusing us.

1. Jeff Kelley, "RE CLAY," *Arts,* March 1982, p. 79.

Toby Buonagurio has been the subject of two recent solo exhibitions—at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York (January 15–February 28) and at Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh (March 27–April 25)—and her work will next be seen at Gallery Yves Arman, New York (October 5–23, 1982).

Thomas Piché is assistant to the curator of Syracuse University Art Collections and art critic for the Syracuse Herald Journal.

Robot #8 *(1980), 23″ (58 cm) high. Courtesy Gallery Yves Arman, New York.*



Ray Gun #2 *(1978), 7″ (18 cm) high. Courtesy Gallery Yves Arman, New York. Photo: Barry Seidman.*

Snakeskin Robot Shoes *(1980), 15″ (38 cm) high. Courtesy Gallery Yves Arman, New York. Collection Mr. and Mrs. William Berley. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

Val Cushing

Sarah Bodine

In the following essays, two writers offer their distinct views of the recent "acorn jars" of Val Cushing, which were exhibited at Cooper/Lynn Gallery, New York (March 24–May 1, 1982).

For some time now Val Cushing's large covered jars—with their full bellies, inturned tops, and stemlike lids—have alluded to apples, tomatoes, and squash. Cushing devised a method of throwing so that the lid could sit within the pot without the belly collapsing. He created glazes that would tautly control the pot's inner volume, as the thin skin of a tomato holds its juice. He made interchangeable lids to show how a form could vary as it does in nature, where no two apples are alike.

With the new work, the covered jar remains his vehicle of exploration, but with a different organic model—the acorn, a smooth oval nut which grows upward from a woody cuplike base. Cushing has not replicated the acorn, but has drawn liberally from it proportions, shapes, and surface textures, such as the nut's smooth surface, sharp tip, and two-part structure. Elements from previous fruit models that have survived in these acorn pieces are traces of developmental stages that Cushing has determined successful and has chosen to retain.

The new work also draws on a larger historic context, assimilating stylistic attributes from a number of cultures and disciplines. Particularly evident is a parallel with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baroque architecture, which emphasized expansive, curvaceous forms, delighted in large scale and a sense of mass, and preferred spatially complex compositions and unconventional yet highly controlled decoration. Ovals replaced spheres to heighten formal complexity and interest; façades undulated in the juxtaposition of concave and convex curves, rendering the entire building voluptuous and passionate. Cushing's work is similarly voluptuous due to comparable manipulation. Simple geometric shapes such as spheres are replaced by ellipses or trapezoids; scale is magnified; concave and convex curves are incorporated in one piece; bold surface treatments, both relief work and glaze texture, lighten the mass of the form. Waisting, banding, color changes, and exaggerated proportional relationships all aid in the rhythmic interplay of zones of activity. Many elements of both Islamic ceramics and architecture, which themselves borrowed from Chinese, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian styles, are also easily associated with this flexible configuration. Arches and minarets, which incorporate horizontal bands of texture and carving to offset the verticality of their forms, coordinated with massive bulb-shaped domes, are common links to Cushing's iconography.

Studied control moves his work another step away from the natural world. Because surface treatments repeat in regular patterns—similar to the infinite patterns of Islamic art—they become stylized, preventing any single element from dominating. While glazes remain the earthy matt browns, oranges, and greens of his previous work, color bands and differences of glaze texture and thickness accentuate the passages between zones.

It is difficult not to find anatomical correlations for these sensuous shapes. Most jars are divided into four zones: foot, lower body, torso, and lid. The foot provides a sturdy base on which the substantial body rests in easy balance with the shoulder. The lower body, analogous to the rough, cuplike base of the acorn, is the area where Cushing has taken most license with proportion, texture, and color, sometimes elongating the form into a tall cylinder, sometimes poking bumps on the surface from the inside, or applying clay buttons and combing swirls on the outside. Above this, the nut portion of the acorn—the torso—while often foreshortened, is faithfully rendered smooth, in striking contrast to the color, texture, and form of the lower portion of the vessel. The lids provide another dramatic shift in our perception of the form; nestled down into the shoulders, their tiny domed heads jut up like the tip on an acorn, the finial on a dome, or the whirligig on a beanie. The conjunction of one zone to the next invigorates these forms, forcing our eye to restlessly follow their continuous-yet-discontinuous contours for a sense of the whole.

The most successful work in this show takes full advantage of historic, natural, and architectural associations. Each zone of the vessel stands as a finished, independent element, while contributing to the balance and integrity of the overall form. Although Cushing claims he would now like to move on to other pursuits in clay, the present work confirms the value of a continuing investigation.

Sarah Bodine is a freelance writer, the editor of Metalsmith *magazine, and a potter living in Manhattan.*

Untitled *(1982), 24" (61 cm) high. Collection Daniel Jacobs. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

Ed Lebow

For nearly a quarter century, Val Cushing's intentions as a potter have been clear. As an unfailing partisan of relatively pure wheel-thrown, utilitarian pots, he has managed to coax some striking forms from the traditional genres of the pitcher, the bowl, the casserole, and the storage jar. His lidded pots have been particularly well admired as among the most gracious couplings of tops and bottoms since King Edward VIII chose Mrs. Simpson over the throne of England.

Characterized by an insistent concentricity and a well-groomed array of glazes and minimal surface decoration, his pieces are charged with an exquisite brevity of expression, a quickness in profile that eases the eye from base to belly to shoulder to top. This line is continuous, flowing without visual pause. The separation of their two chief parts is erased by the keenness of their visual fit. And these dual functions—of being as effective in the hand as in the eye—reflect Cushing's achievement of a gentle symbiosis of utility and beauty.

But what is it that sparks his eye and leads his hand? Over the years he has shown his attraction to apple and acorn shapes: ones that bulge as they rise, then turn in upon themselves, and rise again through stems or sunken caps. Yet what's in the shape of an apple, say, that a grapefruit can't muster, or about an acorn that a kumquat can't match? In essence, what about these moves him?

Ah, motives, the smoking gun of the soul; from here on out there's only speculation, a few guesses. It's one thing to toss out these questions, but what happens when they become the purpose of Cushing's work, as they seem to be with his recent pieces? Is he doing anything to disrupt his longstanding intentions as a "functional potter?" And if so, do the pots change?

The true sages among us are always quick to draw their revolvers whenever a suspiciously cultural matter pops up. But only because they've seen a thousand or more crazed connoisseurs dash into the heat of gallery spots with the latest, long-neglected realm of craft-cum-art in their hands. Before firing off a first round, however, an examination of intentions is wise. After all, many things may have the look and smell of art about them, but do they have the intention to affect us as art, to encourage us to shed disbelief and suck some vital juice from a hunk of stone or a wad of unidentifiable stuff? After all, intentions are really the only things that can account for drab and frequently mundane stagings being treated as art.

My god, think of Western Civilization. We've practically decimated the forests of two pretty fair-sized continents just to pulp out enough paper on which to record, in elaborate and persnickety detail, what the culture monks of some former epoch really meant. Right now, there are hundreds of thousands of taste

hounds out there lifting cultural flagstones that have been pried loose at least a hundred times just to eke out another previously unnoticed sliver of worthiness in a wormy dab of pigment.

Granted, it's easy to pooh-pooh this truffle search for intentions, but those who do are the sort of dieters who pass up the cookies and ice cream at the table only to sneak to the jar and fridge before turning in.

Dogs bay at the moon, salmon ply upstream, and we, like it or not, are stuck with this inconvenient lust for the meaning of the meaning. When you think about it, isn't this the reason for the dusty brawl between the arts and the crafts? Hasn't it always been a question of whose meaning is more, greater, and longer lasting? Without getting eutectic, doesn't intention mark the point at which the experience of utilitarian design melts into something called art? This art is supposed to have the power to involve us in whatever it is that manifests it. If it's a pot, then the combination of material and visual elements are assumed to have been exposed to some sort of vitrifying heat of the psyche to produce a feeling, an itch, that tickles and teases the mind of the viewer as it has more precisely aggravated the mind of the artist.

Perhaps this is a clue to the difference between pots with shared purposes of utilitarianism and visual beauty and those whose sole intention is to mine the beauty in a particular family of shapes. As the viewer experiences it, I don't think it's a difference of quality, but it is one of kind.

Styles have come and gone, but the attempt of artists to effectively describe what their vision really sees, their feelings really feel, and to fuse these into expressions of what they really mean has endured. To satisfy this itch on the mind, their remedies vary with the intensity of the symptoms. Bad ones provoke harder and more determined scratching. In severe cases, the itch tends to push all other considerations out of the way; it becomes the only matter the mind intends to resolve.

This degree of distraction is telling, because it indicates an overpowering and perhaps insatiable mystery behind the artist's purpose. So single-minded is it that it refuses to share its purpose with any other, including utilitarianism. And the aim seems to be to uncover the core of affections that make us feel, to comprehend the gravity that draws Val Cushing, for example, to the shapes of acorns and apples. Once this obsessive itch to make these special feelings known takes hold, a curious shift occurs. In Cushing's case the change is this: he is no longer using shapes to make pots, he is using pots to cull his feelings for shapes.

A lot of long wind, but the facts are simple. Cushing's show at Cooper/Lynn Gallery comprised twenty-one lidded jars, two footed floor bowls, and a plate on one of the gallery walls. All pieces are wheel-thrown; most of the glazes are visually absorbent matt surfaces; many of the jars have two lids to try on. The forms themselves are a variety of straight and spherical shapes that evolve upward into a tubular swell, which in turn curls into a sunken dome and variations of bell-shaped lids: "acorn pots."

A curious feature of these works is their distinctive sectional appearance—as if they evolved in stages. These are emphasized, almost illustrated, by Cushing's treatment of the surfaces. Using combinations of dimples, appliquéd dots, carved sides, thornlike protrusions, ridges, slashes, and curlicues, he applied zones of texture and brushwork decoration alternating with smooth if not untouched surfaces. In almost every instance, the bottom section of the pots received textures, spiraling bands of subtly colored glazes, or arabesque brushwork, while the turbaned top sections were treated with a matt glaze alone.

I say "curious" because Cushing's past work has been characterized by an almost handless quality, as though his hand has covered its trail, has done its job without calling attention to its work. But here the hand is evident; its presence not simply to be expressive, but to articulate the reciprocal beauty of part to part. The pulsing expansion and contraction of volumes as forms undulate, in and out, and rise, now have an almost diagrammatic complement of surface texture. High relief is countered with low, in contrasted to out. Rough and smooth, wide and narrow, agitation and calm, substance and impression—quite literally touch and sight.

Where in the past Cushing's supreme powers of expression and intelligence have joined to make pots with an all-over beauty, his fresh aim to magnify and analyze the underlying appeal of his shapes tends to be self-thwarting. The pots readily disassemble into their elements of shape, texture, and color, but do not so readily reassemble in the eye. We are left with zones of treatment and varying attention that practically announce what they should more subtly convey. They effectively simulate the parts of his vision and how the hand tries to portray them, but they fail to capture the alternating current that enlivens his best work. Has true matter been subordinated to manner?

Yet, there are three clear gems here. As easy as it might seem to point out why and how the weaker pieces fall short, there seems no satisfactory way to account for the integrity of these others. The vocabulary is no different, but the phrasing is majestic. In the end, they simply feel right, and this feeling alone is perhaps the finest condition of appreciation.

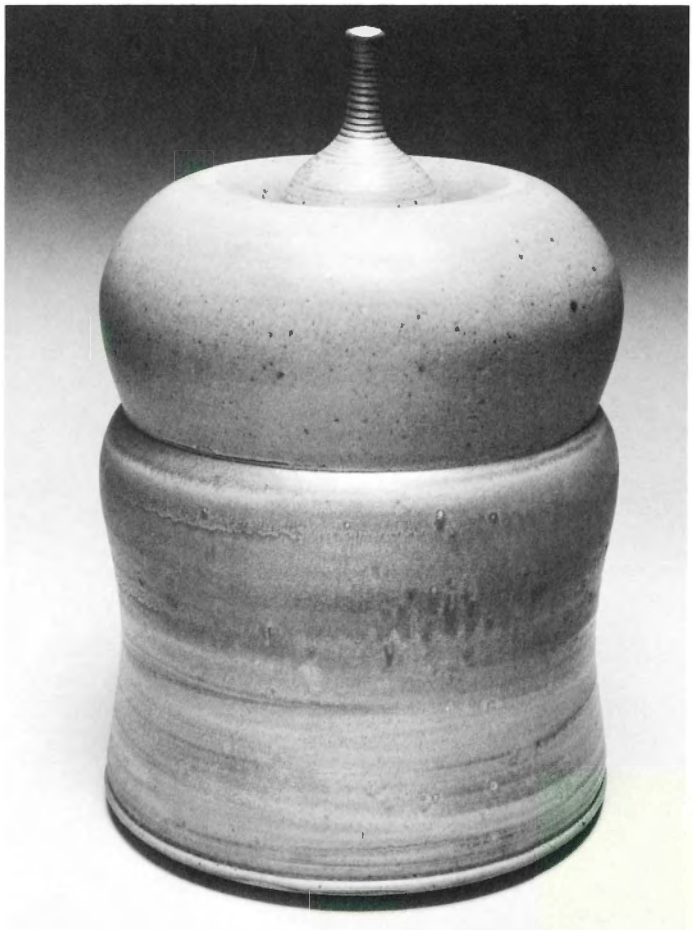
What these three pieces share is a linear force that quickly becomes an awareness of volumetric inhalation and exhalation: the way the walls seem to squeeze and release the air as the eye pursues the line of the pot. The ins and outs of line have all the sensual allure of fertility figures, of the female torso. There is no

sex, but there is complete allure. The lines don't fasten in the neat tongue-and-buckle visual clasp that characterizes most of Cushing's earlier utilitarian pieces. Instead, they rise and sinuate, swell and curl over the surface of their tubular domes, then dive into the heart of their shape and emerge again through the lids and handles, which seem to come into being as a natural consequence of the force of this plunge. Imagine a droplet in a pool sending up a corolla of watery beads, or the way earth folds in behind the blade of a plow. These are rather sudden effects of observable causes, but they suggest the strength of Cushing's finest pieces—a reciprocity that seems to show an "I do for you what you do for me" relation between all surfaces.

Here a push from the inside really means a pull on the outside. This is the drama of a physical event that has happened, of an atmospheric pressure that has acted equally on all parts of the form, that has inflated and stretched the clay to the limits of its material resistance. As much as this convergence of pressures and touches pertains to the material, it also seems to give life to the expression. All these attempts to manipulate the surface—to come from inside as well as outside the pot, to work it from every angle —are no more and no less than the desire to nullify the clay itself, to work it so effectively that the resistance of methods to impressions yields and the pieces are experienced as thin shells of expression. This is the aim. And we are left with the strange sensation that the objects have come into existence by means wholly apart from the real ones.

In this resistance of visual and material forces is the clue to Cushing's attraction to apples and acorns. The rounded and inturning shoulder of an apple and its tight stem or the sunken dome and protruding cap of an acorn have an insistent and contrasting grace. These parts seem to hold onto their functions and shapes, to remain independent of the others, but neither succeeds. They are physically and visually yielding; they exert a mutual effect and their taut forms are the result. "In everything that yields gracefully," said Stravinsky quoting G.K. Chesterton, "there must be resistance. Bows are beautiful when they bend only because they seek to remain rigid. Rigidity that slightly yields, like Justice swayed by Pity, is all the beauty of the earth." It is these bends that Cushing makes so enticing. What we appreciate in them is not simply their occurrence as natural forms, but that we have the faculty within us to fuse their beauty with our feelings for it, to give this native gift expression and lasting resonance, to describe how it has swayed us to small gifts of observation.

The writer is waiting patiently in Brooklyn for the "trickle down" to arrive.



Untitled *(1982), 20" (51 cm) high. Private collection. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

Untitled *(1982), 20" (51 cm) high. Collection Jon and Nancy Cooper. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

What You Didn't See at the Whitney

Joanne Burstein

It's hard being grateful. When the Whitney Museum of American Art decided to redress the years of benign neglect shown toward American clay, missionary zeal must have mingled with desperation—where to begin, who and how much to include? The tactic chosen—"Ceramic Sculpture," where to begin—"Six Artists." Thus, the exhibition's curators declared that what the public would see would be "sculpture" created by "artists." This double declarative title was to unequivocally welcome clay into the artworld; this was to be a landmark show, a high church christening. From the clay community's outpost on the fringes of that artworld, gratitude was certainly forthcoming. Since the six artists chosen were Californians, it was a gratitude doubly felt here, on the West Coast.

The curators surely anticipated the negative to lukewarm response from New York critics; however, it must have been disheartening to have critics appreciative of clay turn on them also. To a degree, this *was* a historic show, in that most of what the Whitney unpacked on its loading dock left the homeland two decades ago.

Nineteen eighty-two is a little late for this work to look avant-garde, even to the uninitiated. To those conversant with clay art, to those who thought this show was about pioneers in the field, the big question became: where is my pioneer? Where is De Staebler, Nagle, Frank, Soldner, Duckworth, or Warashina? Were Warashina and Nagle (both age 43) too young to be pioneers? (Apparently not, Richard Shaw is 41.) Was Soldner too close to the Vessel to be a sculptor? And if this clay show was to have any historic merit, how can the vessel be ignored? What can ceramics mean to a general public (whose only clear definition of "ceramic" means vessel) when the vessel appears only as an uninvited guest at the table?

"Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists" did not try to illustrate the current state of clay or to document its recent history. Given the whims or convictions of its curators,[1] the only possibility left for this show was as a retrospective of six random and stylistically varied artists. And it is here that the show really begins to fall apart.

In catalogue order, first Peter Voulkos. Voulkos is not represented by the full body of his work; indeed, preponderant are large sculptures made between 1958 and 1960. Because of this context, the later three "pots" on exhibit are to be seen as sculptures, not vessels. While Voulkos's large vessels are certainly sculptural, the curators do not give their audience the opportunity (as it had during his 1979 retrospective) to figure that out for themselves. The fare here comes predigested—a curatorial act of bad faith. For the early constructivist sculptures led Voulkos, not into a further exploration of clay, but into the large-scale bronze works of the sixties and seventies. In clay, his living and breathing contribution has been the exploration of the bottle and the platter. He has cultivated these two forms to shape a synthesis of individual and cultural forces that is beautiful and powerful—and missing from this show.

John Mason's large, magnificent sculptures of the mid-fifties to early sixties are here brought together—a truly historic event. The vessels that preceded them are not, however, nor are examples of his continued exploration of modular sculpture in firebrick and other materials. His vision and inventiveness as an artist, as a result, is lost in a tour de force. It seems the curators only wanted to demonstrate that clay doesn't have to be small.

Kenneth Price, who faired highest in overall critical appreciation, may have done so not just because he is a brilliant maverick, but because his work alone is presented fully, consistently, and chronologically. An unbroken line from beginning to present, we pause refreshed to draw our own conclusions. His work, which most clearly combined sculptural and vessel aesthetics, was ironically most often deemed "art" by New York critics.

Robert Arneson is presented as the trickster writ large. This was an apparent truth of his artistic vocabulary even before the furor over his bust of martyred mayor George Moscone. The correspondence between artworld politics and real-world politics is revealed by Arneson's consistent drive to uncover the absurd, to turn nonart into art and vice versa. Like William T. Wiley and Philip Guston, the cartoon and the joke are expressly used to undermine themselves and the artist's ego. This quality of Arneson's work might have been better appreciated (by critics and public alike) if some of his earlier work (1961-71) had been included. I particularly would have liked to see his series of classic ceramic cups and saucers—metaphors for the artist's own psyche.

When we get to David Gilhooly, even I falter, not knowing if the missing work (of the mid- to late sixties) would have helped in understanding his commitment to the frog metaphor. The frog—his obsession, maybe even his millstone—is certainly the only aspect of his work that interested the curators. The best one can say is that they were trying to be open minded; at worst, subversive. In truth, Gilhooly's work may have been the most approachable for the public, in that it created its own, albeit narrow, context.

Although Richard Shaw, like Arneson and Gilhooly, has used clay to construct visual metaphors, he has consistently strived toward the poetic image—most recently his stickman assemblages in the trompe l'oeil tradition. The extreme refinement of this late work was done a disservice by the exclusion of his lighthearted and ambling experiments in low-fire Funk during the sixties. Shaw is a relatively youthful

(Previous page) Sinking Brick Plates *(1969) by Robert Arneson. Courtesy Hansen Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco.*

Untitled *(1957) by John Mason, 28½" (72 cm) high. Collection Rena Bransten. Photo: Bruce Handelsman.*

Untitled Plate *(1981) by Peter Voulkos, 24" (61 cm) in diameter. Courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Schopplein Studio.*

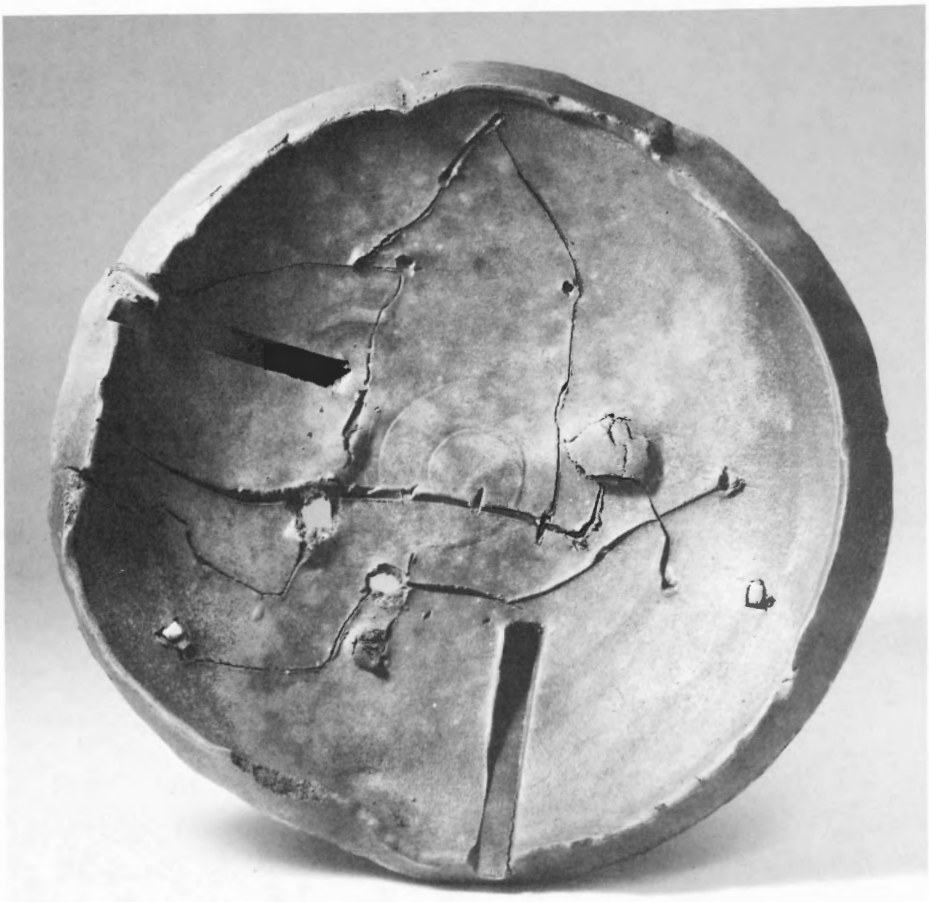
innovator whose example (particularly the works done in collaboration with sculptor Robert Hudson in 1973) persuaded innumerable ceramists to adopt the technique of casting. The way in which Shaw has developed this technique to accommodate a Cornell-like vision certainly qualifies him for inclusion as one of the big six, although the work shown here dates from the time at which his technique was so refined that he appears somewhat precious.

When all is said and done, "Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists" is not so much flawed and illogical as it is sabotaged by its own internal logic—the logic of New York Art Historical Revisionism.[2] This revisionism is based on the concept of progress; it argues that art must, like science, march ever forward from past to present to future. However, art being organic (despite all efforts of art historians to make it logically comprehensible), often outgrows its ill-fitting if convenient classifications. Some taxonomies—Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Funk Art, or Minimalism—have stuck; time and consensus have fused them into the language. When we see "Abstract Expressionism" in print, we all accept by consensus what is meant, even though a Rothko doesn't have that much to do with a Pollock, or a Kline with a de Kooning. Regardless of these realities, it is the historian's impulse to go back and tidy up the mess left by art's organic nature.

Several years ago, when it became apparent that the seventies had laid waste all of art history's neat definitions, when artists were doing just about everything with just about every material, critics proposed a convenient catchall term to ease their loss for words: Pluralism. Clay is the pluralist medium par excellence. With its native traditions all but extinguished and its genetic roots on the opposite shore of one ocean or the other, its aesthetic validity is purely relative.

Contemporary clay's roots are in Malraux's "museum without walls" and in the chance encounters particular to each person working in the medium. Clay has seduced three generations of painters, sculptors, designers, and architects away from their more sanctified fields and into a heterogeneous camp, polarized from the machinations of the greater art community. Within that camp are artists who draw from European art sources, from ethnic craft sources, from Robert Morris, and from Bauhaus philosophies, as well as from their private responses to the physical properties of the material itself.

When the well-meaning curators of this exhibition turned to the hopeless task of introducing, documenting, and validating the pluralist world of clay, they used their own criteria for meeting the historical imperative. Thus, Abstract Expressionism = Voulkos and a segment of Mason; Minimalism = another segment of Mason



(not documented); Pop Art = Arneson; Surrealism = Shaw; Funk Narrative = Gilhooly; the Decorative = Price.[3] This was a large order to fill and it is no wonder that the vessel—as necessary to clay as drawing a line on a piece of paper is to painting—was eliminated before they began.

In truth, who would want the job of selecting six artists of the last three decades to represent all of American painting or sculpture? Our beleaguered curators were bound to fail. By virtually ignoring the vessel, by defining clay in artworld terms to make it fit a definition of Art, they only succeeded in raising the question—is it art? By not meeting the issue head on, by only presenting individual flashes of genius, the show made celebrities of a handful of artists while leaving clay as aberrant an artform as it was before.

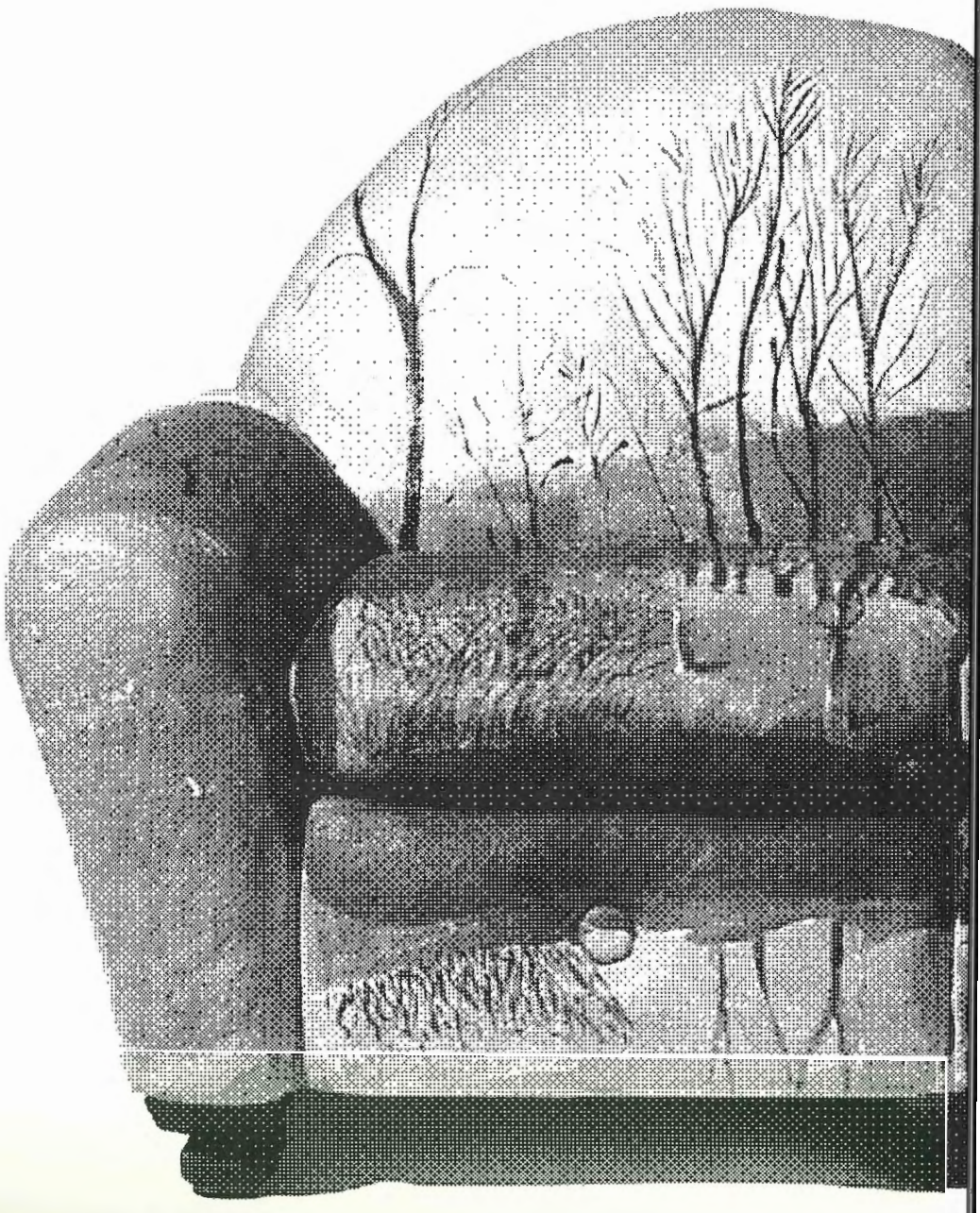
For many years, clay artists have accepted their lot as outsiders as either a necessary evil or an actual benefit. There is no doubt this Whitney christening changes that. Welcome is the critical response from a broader audience; welcome, too, is the increased financial support. But what of this fleeting celebrity? One only has to look at the current Schnabel phenomenon to see what a mixed blessing that is. Gratitude for the Whitney's declaration that clay is art should not distract us from the perils of an intoxicating marketplace, which promises to swallow up, chew, and spit out many a talent to satisfy its insatiable hunger for coin.

1. "Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists" was organized by Richard Marshall, associate curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (where the exhibition premiered, December 9–February 7, 1982) and by Suzanne Foley, former curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (April 8–June 27, 1982).

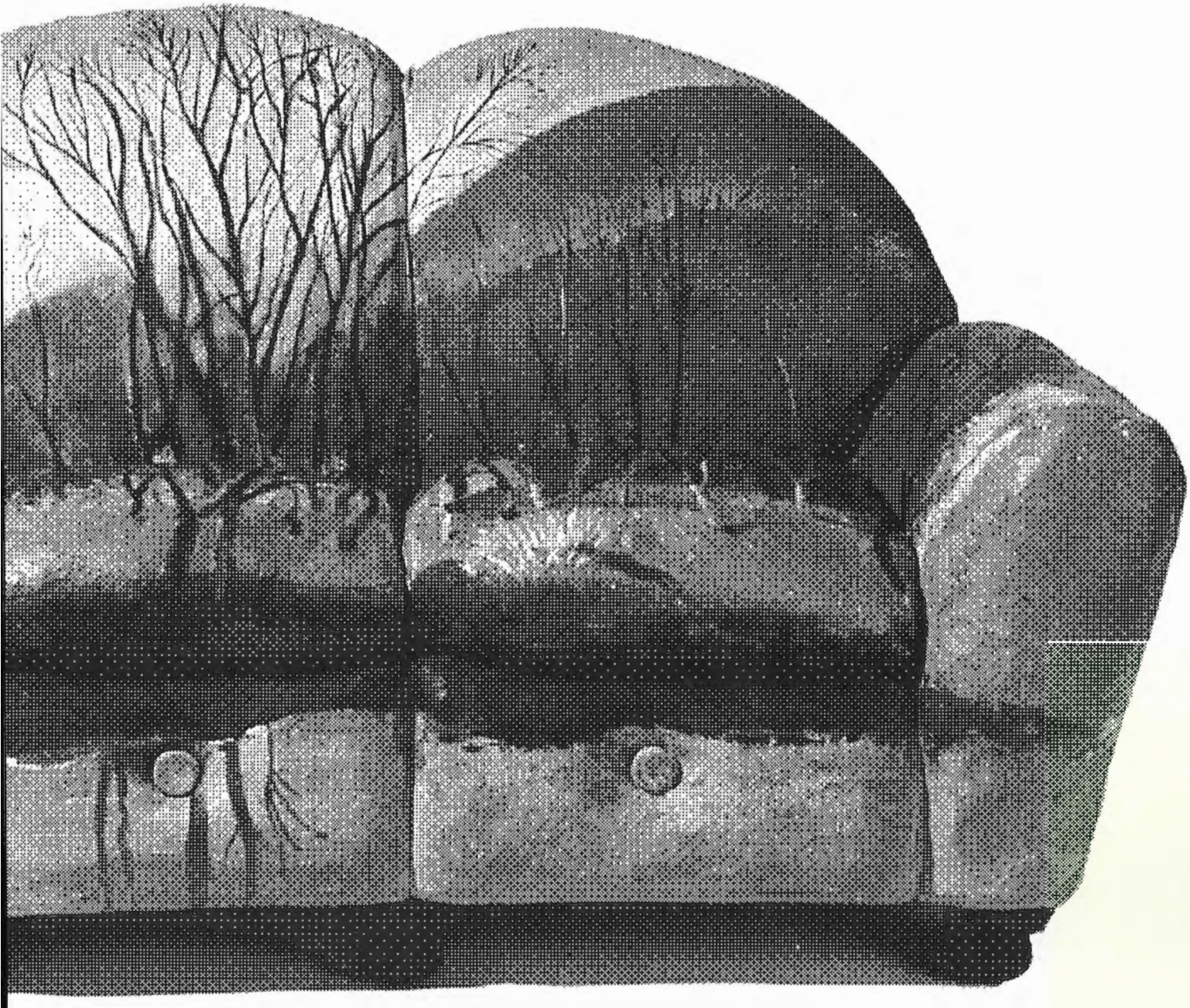
2. Of which the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art (most recently with its realistic painting-as-progenitor-of photography show, "Before Photography") are its most notable proponents.

3. Some exploration of Price's influence on Kim MacConnel, Robert Kushner, and others would be interesting, though inconvenient, since the only conclusion one could draw from this show is that clay always has and always will follow Art.

Sculptor Joanne Burstein is a free-lance writer living in the San Francisco Bay area.



Couch with Landscape *(1965) by Richard Shaw, 11" x 26" x 12" (28 x 66 x 30 cm). Collection Rena Bransten. Photo: Bruce Handelsman.*



A Way of Seeing

Mark Anderson

"Current theories about art and craft essentially reduce to two propositions: (1) Art and craft have converged; art may be functional or nonfunctional. (2) Non-functional work is art; functional work is craft. The strengths of ceramic art and ceramic craft are both devalued by these theories. The belief that any nonfunctional ceramic work must be considered art has led to a preoccupation with technique at the expense of true artistic presence, while ceramic craftsmen have been needlessly encumbered by the pressure to go beyond practicality and precision in order to appear clever or virtuous."

Is it possible to use poetry to order food in a restaurant? Perhaps it is possible to use *poetic* language to order a meal, but to call all poetic language poetry engenders two complications. By denying a distinction between the practical and the artistic use of language, good poets would merely be those who have mastered the techniques of poetic convention, regardless of the intent or content of their "poetry." One might even be considered clever to have created a poem merely for the purpose of ordering a hamburger. Since the practical use of language benefits from concise, easily understood constructions, to promote poetry as a desirable innovation to everyday language would be counterproductive. The practical use of language has both a lower limit, comprehension, and an upper limit, economy of means.

But if the artistic use of language is distinct from language with a practical purpose, what is the use of poetry? If poetry is merely the nonfunctional use of language for the edification of an artistic elite, why should poetry hold such an exalted position in almost every culture?

Since poetry is a historically well-established artform, its purpose or value to society is generally not questioned. Where the distinction between practical and artistic use is not so obvious—arguably the case with ceramic art and ceramic craft—an artform's purpose or value *is* in question.

Current theories about art and craft essentially reduce to two propositions: (1) Art and craft have converged; art may be functional or nonfunctional. (2) Nonfunctional work is art; functional work is craft. The strengths of ceramic art and ceramic craft are both devalued by these opposing theories. On the one hand, the belief that any nonfunctional ceramic work must be considered art has led to a preoccupation with technique at the expense of true artistic presence. On the other hand, ceramic craftsmen have been needlessly encumbered by the pressure to go beyond practicality and precision in order to appear clever or virtuous.

It is the aim of this (and subsequent) essays to offer an analysis of art and craft that goes beyond these present theories. By examining the implications of the practical use and artistic use of a medium, perhaps a way of seeing the full potential of ceramic art will be found. Subsequent essays will investigate the socially distinct categories of art and the ways in which contemporary ceramic art relates to each. I hope such an analysis will demonstrate that both ceramic art and ceramic craft have valid roles to play in contemporary society, independent of each other and of other established mediums.

Social scientists, philosophers, and art critics may be seen as the translators of the meanings of art for society at large. With this in mind, it is useful to examine certain aspects of Howard Becker's well-known essay, "Arts and Crafts."[1] Becker defines craft as:

a body of knowledge and skill which can be used to produce useful objects implying aesthetic standards on which judgments of particular items of work may be based.

At first reading, this definition seems general enough to be taken as an objective starting point. Let us consider, however, that phrase referring to "aesthetic standards." If aesthetic standards normally pertain to beauty and taste, are they necessarily included in the realm of craft? A more accurate and simpler definition might be:

a body of knowledge and skill which can be used to produce useful objects.

The word "useful" implies standards of utility, rather than aesthetics. Just as the practical use of language implies upper and lower limits of precision and comprehension, standards of utility imply their own upper and lower limits. A poet in a restaurant would be expected to limit his command of language to that which related to the task at hand—ordering food to satisfy his hunger. Similarly, the person who applies himself to the production of useful objects must exercise his skills appropriately. To encumber the useful object with details that do not enhance its use is counterproductive or uneconomical. The useful object may be aesthetically pleasing (we tend to respond favorably to beautifully presented food), but if it is beautiful to the point of becoming a precious object, or if its beauty is contrary to its use, it is more likely to be seen as a conceit rather than good craft.

In their vehement attack on the aesthetics of industrial design, the potters of the "crafts revival" largely ignored the standards of utility to which industry was addressing itself. If the potter's wheel was a mechanical innovation to handbuilt pottery, and the jigger and jolley method further innovations, are such innovations not an increase in the potter's "body of knowledge and skill?" Is it not logical then to see mass production and industrialization as the natural evolution of craft skills? While it is true that the mechanical replication of an object offers little possibility of variation, replication does not detract from the aesthetic merit of the original object. It is absurd and arbitrary to assert that craft

ceased after the potter's wheel. Is not man's distinction his ability to use tools?

Tied to the return to "handmade" useful objects has been the tendency of the crafts revivalist to address historical and ritual utility, rather than contemporary need. The fact that running water, refrigeration, and diminished living space, for example, have changed the form, specification, and size of many useful objects is frequently overlooked. Consequently, many "utilitarian" potters continue to produce their wares along traditional lines, retreating into a kind of anti-utilitarian virtuosity and thereby undermining the validity of their "useful" objects. The primary use of such objects is then as

objects of aesthetic contemplation, of collection and ostentatious display, and as items of investment and pecuniary gain.

Because these qualities are "the utilities as defined by the art world," according to Becker, we seem to have arrived at a point where art and craft converge. Craft objects which are in some way curious, not particularly useful, but collectible or "showy" are, says Becker, valid as art.

Earlier in his essay, Becker defines the artist as someone who gives "the product," art, "its unique and expressive character." While this description is valid if enlarged beyond its materialist boundaries, Becker chooses not to carry out such an investigation. Instead, he characterizes the artist as an invader who must destroy the practical application of an object in order to produce art. Consequently, the artworld's "utilities" are thoroughly nonfunctional. But if the artist is someone who defiles or abuses a traditionally useful medium, using "standards which are aggressively nonutilitarian," is not such an artist destructive rather than creative?

The weakness of Becker's theory is his reluctance to admit that much of what is presently designated "craft" could better be understood as reproduction art, given that it is neither useful nor particularly unique and expressive. But Becker wants to see art and craft as part of a dialectic mechanism: art renews itself through rejection of traditional skills and conventions. Once established, new artists set up their own conventions, which future artists will overthrow. Such a mechanical view is inadequate on several levels.

First, if we recall that art coexists with craft even in the most primitive societies, art must have other uses than those negative and nonutilitarian ones outlined by Becker. Second, when applied to a medium of both practical and artistic applications, such as paint, his dialectic would support such absurd assertions as these: that Jackson Pollock's action painting was a reaction to the virtuoso skill of a Salvador Dali or an Andrew Wyeth; or that Minimalism was a movement toward the practical use of paint, an assertion of craft standards. By what criteria can we compare the house painter and, say, the photorealist? Similarly, is music merely the nonfunctional use of noise to explore an expressive problem? Is John Cage's utilization of random noise a return to the "craft" use of sound? Or should it be seen as a rejection of the "skill and craft of the artist?"

If art is to be considered solely as a commodity, a decorative or aesthetic object, then for all intents and purposes art is useless. That it is the product of an artist can then be seen as a dubious virtue, distinguishing art from those things that occur naturally and are of aesthetic interest. And given that artistic creations always seem paltry when compared to the Grand Canyon or even the beauty of a wildflower, it would appear that art is not only useless but sadly arrogant.

However, if a seemingly useless object is understood to have been created with artistic intent—that it owes its existence to being the conscious statement of its creator or a reflection of the sentiments of its owner—we are closer to a true understanding of art, not as commodity but as communication. By denuding art and craft of their respective primary values to society (art as communication, craft for practical use) we are left to admire the virtuosity of the meaningless manipulation of mediums. While a given medium will nearly always have both a practical and an artistic use, the intention behind and value to society of each use is fundamentally different.

In the absence of a stated intent, the viewer or user will ascribe the intent perceived. Thus if a craftsman produces something of no practical use which nevertheless transmits some meaning, the object will be perceived as art regardless of the maker's intention. Conversely, a cup made by an artist, if used as a cup by its owner, is thereby received as a craft object; its artistic nature is seen as additional to its use and may add to or subtract from that use. Finally, we may consider an ancient (hence valuable) beaker. Although created to be used, and despite its resemblance to the vessels from which we drink today, such a beaker is of archaeological, historical, and artistic interest. A craft object, by virtue of our perception of its communicative value, is transformed into an art object or artifact. Given that a craft object may become art, or have both practical and artistic value, is it not of more value to produce useful art? Social consensus seems to refute the desirability of such a notion; an examination of communicative versus practical use reveals why.

All communication necessarily refers to something other than the communicator itself and is understood relative to its referent.[2] By contrast, the practical use of an object depends on its physical existence and availability. That is, the value of something as communication depends on the importance and existence of something else to which the communication relates. The practical value of something depends on its immediate, inherent properties. Artistic communication may be further distinguished from practical communication: whereas the latter depends on the presupposed or known existence of something, the former has the power to refer to the *possible,* to create and make concrete the imagined existence of anything.

If I go to a foreign country ignorant of that country's language, it may be assumed I will experience difficulty in communicating. If I develop some kind of rudimentary sign language, such as pointing or nodding to express my needs, communication for some practical purposes will be possible. Communication will be limited to that which is immediately visible, however. Now if I draw pictures representing those things I would like to have, but have not seen in that country, I am making concrete the existence of something which only *possibly* exists. The picture is a fiction, art, until it has some practical communicative purpose. It will always be an abstraction, however, never the thing to which it refers.

Art is a communicative exploration of values, concepts, and relationships. By taking images or ideas or words with which we are familiar and restating them within a stylized context of artistic convention or ceremony, the artist may point to other possible ways of seeing or understanding society and the environment, in addition to their material immediacy. Throughout history, art may be observed as the embodiment of man's desire to communicate and record the dominant aspects of his culture, either for the benefit of the other members of his society or for future and unseen generations.

Within the notion that art is essentially communicative: (1) art refers to the general through the specific; (2) art is likely to be best understood in a stylized context; (3) the value of a communication increases with time and the extent to which it is understood. Implicit in each of these propositions is the notion that practical utility would in some way trivialize or act against communicative value. Practical utility necessitates disposability: food is eaten, clothes wear out, cups are brokern. If art as communication is to have optimum value, it cannot be so temporal or so easily discarded.[3]

There is nothing magical or divine about art, although its power to go beyond the sphere of immediate experience and concretize imagined experience gives it a certain mystical quality that has been exploited by artists and their patrons throughout history. To the extent to which a medium can communicate a "current expressive problem," the medium chosen in which to embody artistic communication is crucial. When considering the use of a given medium for art, however, the words "craft" and "craftsmanship" have little meaning; communication may be equally valid as art whether perceived as nonutilitarian or as so like a utilitarian object as to be indistinguishable. The validity of a vessel as art does not lie in its conformity to the physical properties of a craft vessel; it may be equally valid as a painting, a photograph, a poem, or a soft sculpture.[4]

Ceramic art may be simultaneously concrete and abstract. The current reluctance of ceramists and critics to confront this perceptual complexity has resulted in a convergent populus of artists and craftsmen having ambiguous and ill-stated intentions. Consequently, both industry and established abstract art movements have largely preferred to avoid rather than accommodate ceramists in either the practical or artistic mainstream. Until ceramics is freed from superficial comparisons of art and craft, and each is realized to have its own fundamental social value, the art/craft movement will continue to make only minor contributions to contemporary and future culture. The restricting concept of material and historical utility must be overcome if ceramic art is to communicate eloquently in our society. Its proponents must now outline, develop, and enunciate a syntax of clay.

1. Howard S. Becker, "Arts and Crafts," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 4. All quotations are taken from the condensed version reprinted in *Ceramics Monthly* (January 1982).
2. This idea is discussed in detail by Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978) in his chapter on "Self Knowledge" (see the heading, "The Systematic Elusiveness of I").
3. On the notions (1) art transcends both individual and material components and (2) endurance versus temporary use, see: Soetsu Yanagi, "The Way of Tea," *The Unknown Craftsman* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972).
4. See: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus,* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), especially 4.014 and 4.0141.

Potter Mark Anderson was born in Britain, where he studied sociology and philosophy at the University of Surrey. He now works with Byron Temple in his studio in Lambertville, New Jersey, makes his own pots, and is undertaking an extensive study of the sociology of art and craft.

Raymon Elozua

Susan Wechsler

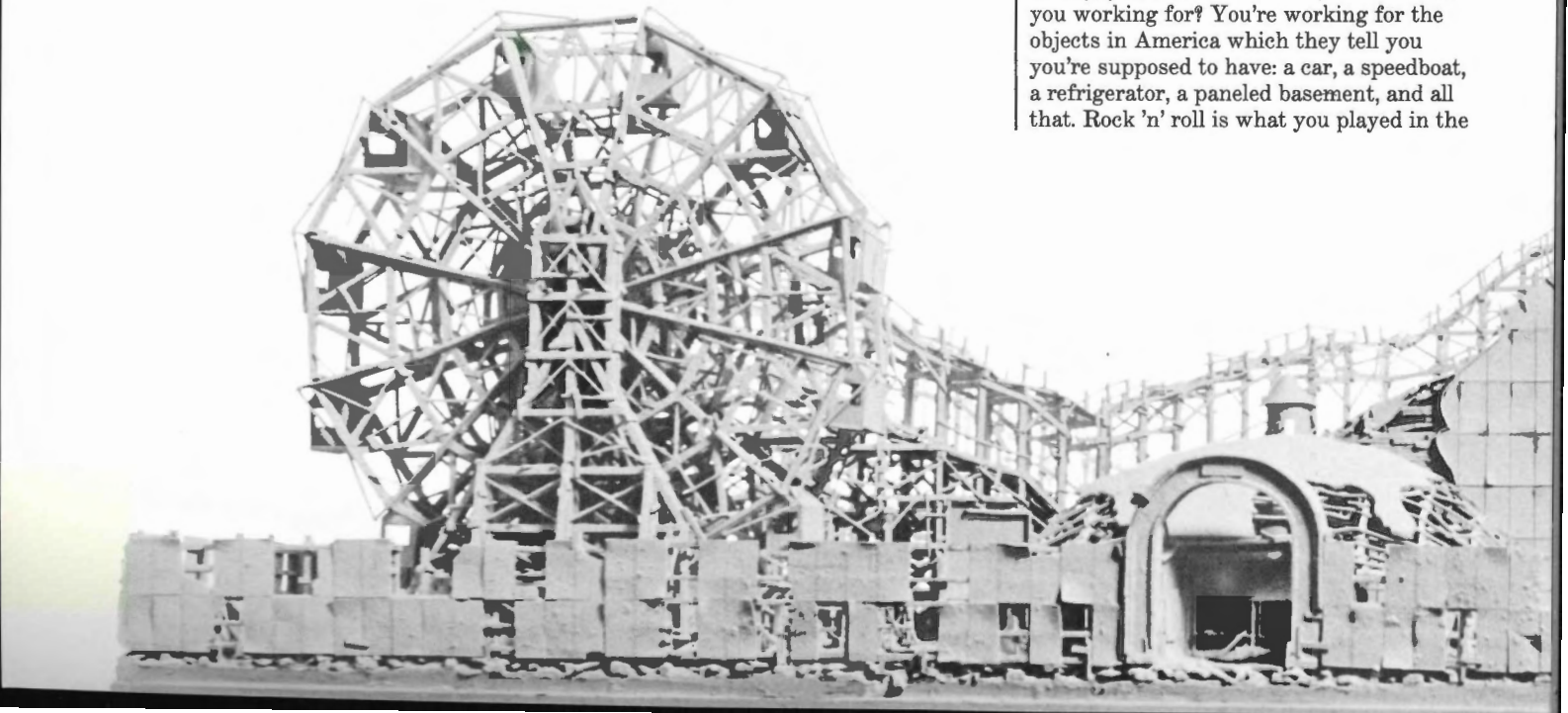
Raymon Elozua was born in Germany in 1947, and came to America in 1951. He grew up in South Chicago, where he attended the University of Chicago, studying ceramics and sculpture with Ruth Duckworth.
Since his youth, Elozua has displayed a tremendous interest in and talent for construction and design, as well as a love for fantasy, drama, and meticulous detail. He custom painted motorcycles and cars, was a passionate model train builder, and worked in the theater, planning and building props and sets. All these elements have been synthesized in his current body of work.
Elozua's industrial landscapes, important images from his own childhood environment, exhibit a dreamlike presence and recall elements of stage sets, dioramas, shadow boxes, and other controlled visions or displays. Often surreal in nature, these highly evocative scenes serve to comment on America's fading industrial heritage and to illuminate our familiar but disappearing past. At the same time, they reveal the nature of clay both as a material and a process. With careful handling of his medium, Elozua constructs complex structures, like a carpenter, in elaborate detail. He then manipulates their destruction, forcing us to recognize the passage and effect of time, and the fragility of man's endeavors.
This November, Raymon Elozua's work will be exhibited at O.K. Harris Gallery, New York. All works courtesy O.K. Harris.

I was born in Germany in 1947—a significant fact because I could never grow up to be President of the United States! You have to be natural born. So I was immediately denied the acme of every child's American dream. . . . I was forced to seek other areas for greatness! My father was of Spanish descent and my mother French; they were first-generation immigrants to America. They both really maintained a European way of life and they essentially looked at this whole new experience, this whole new culture, with a European sensibility.

As I grew up, I always felt like an observer of America and that was always a difficult position. I had a European way of looking at things—not only the great things about America, but also some of the things Americans deluded themselves about. So, it was weird to embrace hotrodding and cars and rock 'n' roll and at the same time know how empty, silly, and ridiculous it all was.

We lived in South Chicago, the heart of the city; it was really one of the most major industrial areas in America for a long time. You looked at the skyline and you would see smokestacks; you'd look out the window and you would always see billowing clouds of black smoke, white smoke, gray smoke. I had a white Chevy convertible in high school. I would wash and wax the car every Sunday, then go to the drive-in. I would wash my car at nine in the morning, get it waxed by eleven o'clock, and by noon there was a thin layer of black soot because of the smokestacks. My father worked as an administrator for U.S. Steel for about five years, then had problems with the economy and the recession and decided to go into business for himself in real estate. I worked the steel mills for a summer and a half. That was what you did for the summer time and when you graduated from high school; it was just the culture. I mean, you're blue-collar working class.

Looking back to that time, I was not conscious of being a hood or a greaser—working class was what I knew. You work all day, you come home tired, and what are you working for? You're working for the objects in America which they tell you you're supposed to have: a car, a speedboat, a refrigerator, a paneled basement, and all that. Rock 'n' roll is what you played in the



car, it was the background for the drive-in, it was the background for driving around with no place to go . . . like Chuck Berry said, "with no particular place to go."

I think my first experience with art was with cars. My next-door neighbor had a 1953 Lincoln, nosed and decked with a big Ford motor in it. The kid across the street, Richie, who was a good friend, he had a '55 Chevy, and then the kid down the street had built up a '23 Model T roadster from scratch. The kid three doors down had a Triumph chopper and a '32 Ford, which he chopped, channeled, and painted with candy apple.

So my first experience of art, in an object sense, was custom cars. I look at art as something you create from nothing. And art in that sense is the changing of certain cultural symbols into your own. So people take the '55 Chevy, take off all the chrome, fill it in, paint it the color they want it, upholster it with a rolled and pleated interior, put the motor the way they want it, you know, put lights in the wheelwells, paint it silver. People took charge of the symbols in their lives and altered them to fit their ideas.

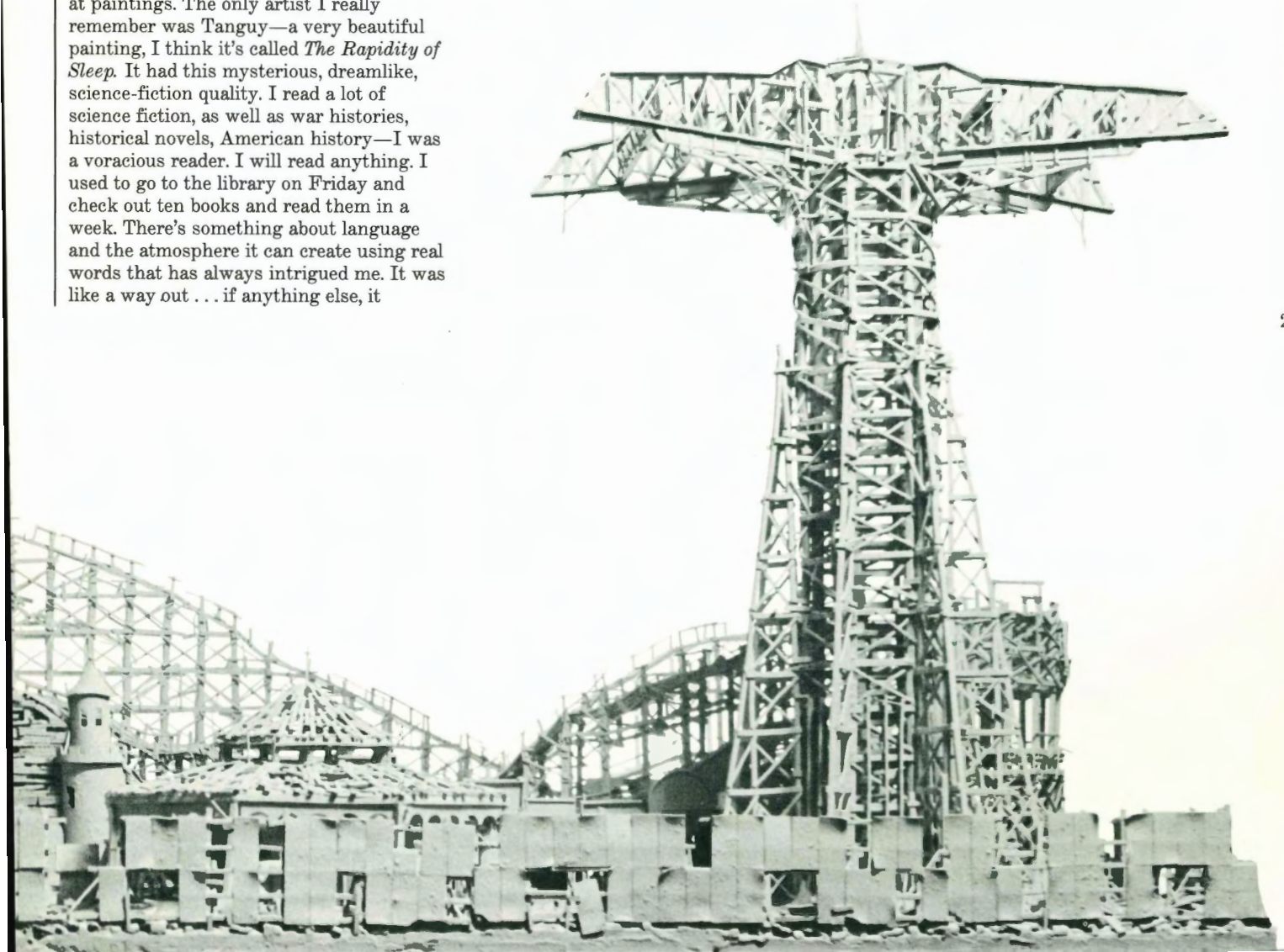
I'd also look at paintings. We would go to the Art Institute, maybe once or twice a year (because my mother was French, she knew about Corot and Seurat), and I'd look at paintings. The only artist I really remember was Tanguy—a very beautiful painting, I think it's called *The Rapidity of Sleep.* It had this mysterious, dreamlike, science-fiction quality. I read a lot of science fiction, as well as war histories, historical novels, American history—I was a voracious reader. I will read anything. I used to go to the library on Friday and check out ten books and read them in a week. There's something about language and the atmosphere it can create using real words that has always intrigued me. It was like a way out . . . if anything else, it pointed a way to another existence.

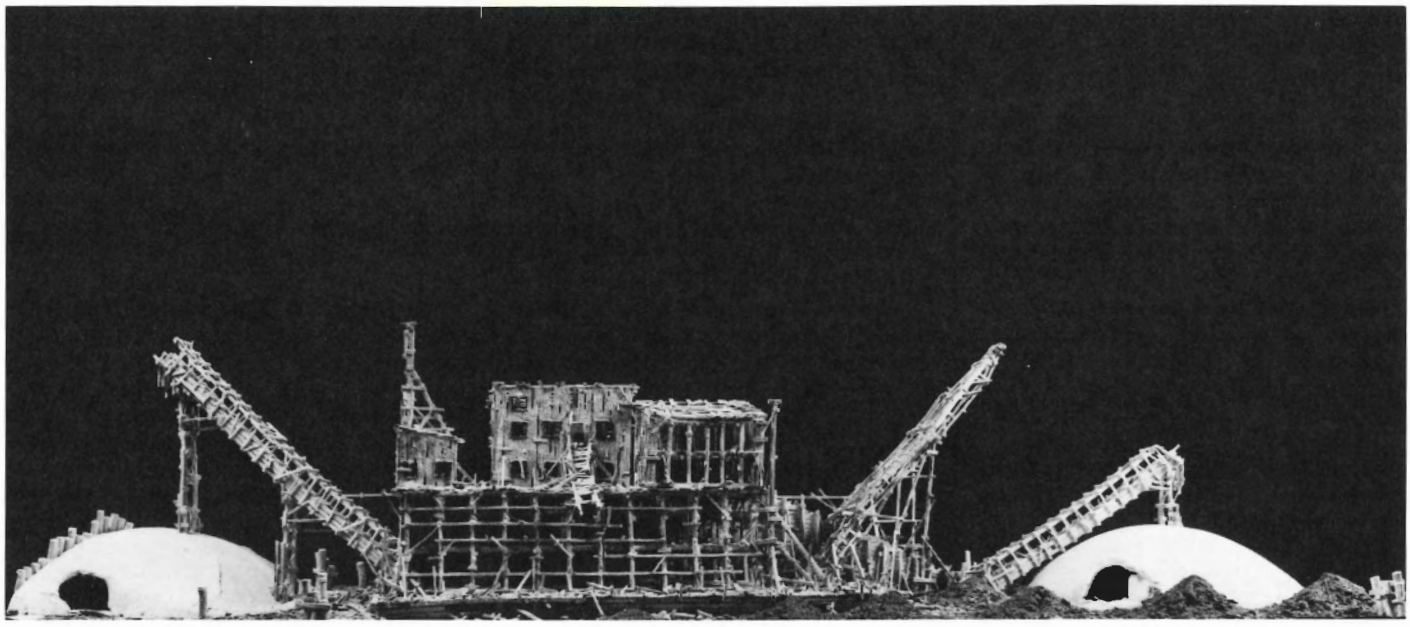
As a kid I played in sandboxes, where I had a fantasy world. I constructed model boats, planes, cars, railroads . . . there was always this construction going on. I had my own railroad—a big layout—and I issued stock in it. It was a logging railroad, "Conifer and Western" I called it. (I'm doing art now, just a different title!) We also used to go to the Field Museum [of Natural History] and the Museum of Science and Industry—they had a train layout, fifty by fifty feet! And I would tell my mother, "When I grow up, I want to make models like this." She'd say, "Sure, kid, why don't you just be a lawyer or a doctor?"

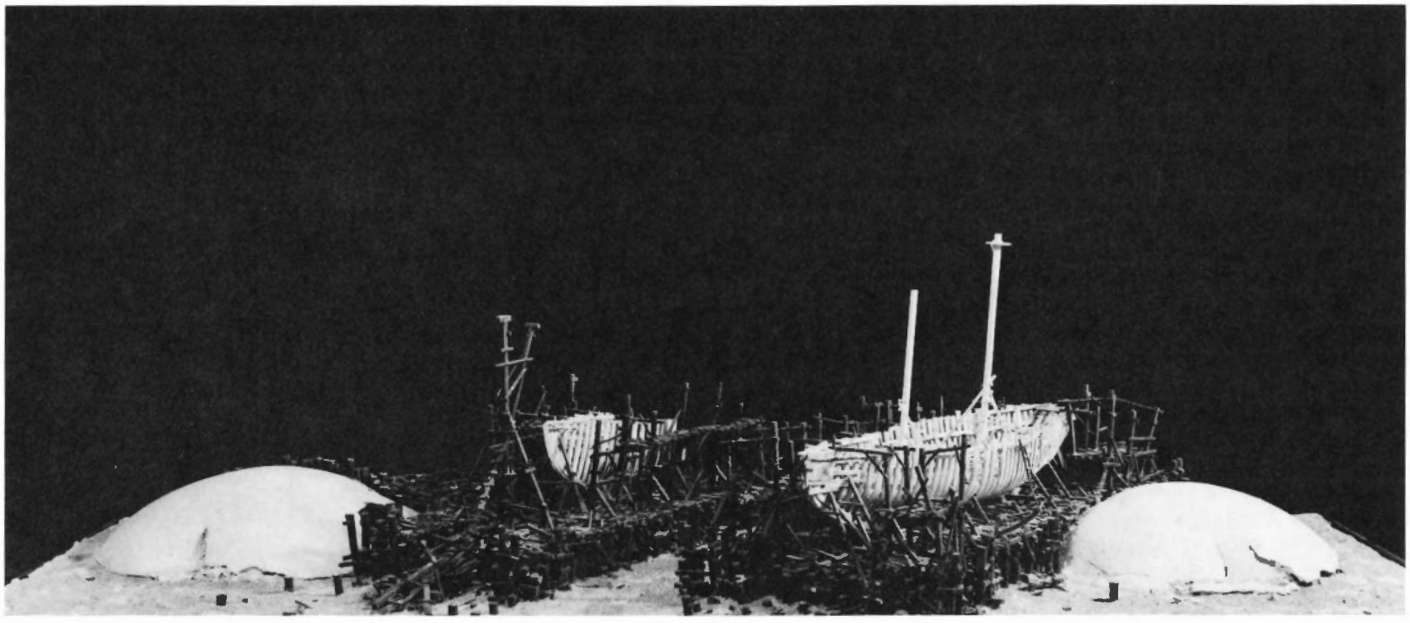
Ostensibly, I went to college to become a lawyer, so I majored in political science. That also had the least amount of requireds, so I could have the most electives. In my second year, I worked on a play—we had to act and write a play—and through that I connected with Virgil Burnett. He was a professional illustrator teaching at the University of Chicago and was in charge of the theater department and the school gallery. I did construction of props and sets and I watched him do drawings. He was an incredible illustrator. From that point on, he got me a job as a gallery assistant.

In my third year, I decided I would take an introduction to art. At the university, I was first exposed to the idea of art as a subject you could take and to the "artist" as a role you could play. When I thought of artists, I always had the stereotype of this guy in a garret who painted and lived frugally, but who was essentially doing what he wanted; he was playing. I liked the idea of just playing as a child, in an innocent way. I thought art would be a great way to make a living—you do what you want and you get paid for it.

The University of Chicago had the worst fine arts department in the world because the art historians ruled the school. But despite that, they had somehow hired two professional artists, Virginio Ferrari, an Italian sculptor, and Ruth Duckworth. She was a noted ceramist and sculptor, not a potter. They were both professionally accredited artists *first;* they were not teachers teaching art. They both came to Midway Studios, the fine arts department, which was stuck way out on the fringe of the campus, ignored by everyone. Meeting







(Previous page) #19 Amusement Park *(1982: work in progress), 44″ x 50″ x 98″ (112 x 127 x 250 cm), ceramic with oil. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

(Top) #17 Gold Dredge *(1981), 19″ x 24″ x 72″ (48 x 61 x 183 cm), ceramic with acrylic. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

#16 Shipyard *(1981), 20″ x 24″ x 72″ (51 x 61 x 183 cm), ceramic with acrylic. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

them was like meeting real people who were doing real-life things. They had a flavor to them that was just incredible; I liked them both instantaneously. They were both able to motivate students because there was no theory or bullshit—they were real. If you wanted to make something, they would say, "Okay, how do we go about making it?" You'd try and you'd experiment.

I had two weeks with Ferrari, two weeks with a litho guy, two weeks of drawing, and two weeks with clay. When I hit the clay part it was so much fun because you could squeeze it, you could pinch it, you could work with it, and it was like earth. I just really liked the clay and from that point I essentially dropped all my courses and stayed in the clay studios for a period of about six months. I did errands and cleaned up glazes and worked on the wheel and at sculptural things and handbuilding. Ruth Duckworth had a special attitude and sensibility that was really refreshing. She taught you to think about what you were doing. One of the things that is remarkable about her is that she's not a one-idea artist, or a potter. She made pots and sculpture, and her sculpture ranged from mural to architectural to formal studies. So when I was with her in those formative years, I knew that pots were one thing, but that the other thing—let's say making an object or whatever it was—was a lot of fun and it was interesting. And that was more like what art was.

I decided I wanted to go to school for ceramics and applied to one in Los Angeles. When I drove down there it was August and it was such a grungy city! I didn't like the work and I didn't like the studio—it was so large, and it didn't have the intimacy Midway Studios had. I just sort of freaked out, went to Berkeley, and worked in an auto body shop for about six months.

I moved to New York in 1969 and got into set construction at Juilliard. But the hours were crazy and you always got laid off for six weeks after the production until they started again. I got tired of working in theater. I had heard about Rhinebeck [the Northeast Craft Fair] and when I went up there I looked at half the stuff and just thought I could do better. I had always liked fooling around with clay, so in the fall of 1974 I bought a kiln and about five hundred pounds of clay and started making little sculptures in porcelain and little bowls with the idea of trying to sell them. I applied to Rhinebeck and got in the following June.

Working in clay and making the pots gave me entré to the idea of making art. If I failed there, I knew then maybe I couldn't make the next jump. And if I was successful there, then that would give me the confidence to go up the next step. Deep in my heart I suppose I had always wanted to be an artist, but when one says, "I want to be an artist," how does one get to this goal? You know you just don't jump there. When you're going to be a writer, you just don't sit down and write the Great American Novel—you write little vignettes or studies. You have to learn the craft of your work—you have to learn the medium, the technical part. The great thing about doing production work for Rhinebeck was that I could learn clay as a medium. Then when I came to, let's say, greater ideas, I would have command of the medium to execute a larger vision.

Clay is one of the most difficult mediums around because it's liquid, it's soft, it's hard, it's fired—and I think a lot of people have stayed away from it because it is so difficult. Clay has its own mind. Using it, you have two or three choices. One is to impose your will on it; two is to let the clay do whatever it does; and then there is a middle range, where it's almost like dancing with it—you lead each other around. A lot of my work deals with the nature of the medium—clay as clay and also clay as process. I use time as process, fire as a process, shrinkage and warping as part of the process.

I begin my work with these perfect domes, which originated from a bowl upside down in the slake bucket. Clay slakes down, decays, and I've spent hours watching that process—watching the waves break down sand castles along the ocean shore, or snow melting, or erosion on the sides of hills. And water just naturally destroys these perfect domes. Now I don't have any choice about how the dome is decayed, but I can stop the process at a certain point. From that point on, I work with the idea of landscape; I arrange my ground. I organize the domes in some sort of composition, which is intellectual, and then start conceiving the type of structure I want to build. When I build the structure, I build it brand new, just as a real carpenter would. Then with my own hands and through time, I break it down. You know, you look at marble steps that are worn down, you look at the barn where the snow has broken down the beams and caused them to sag. As the clay dries, boards start cracking and falling off, the clay warps a little bit. Then it starts to cause another action. And when the piece is fired, the heat will transform it even more. I mimic the aging process.

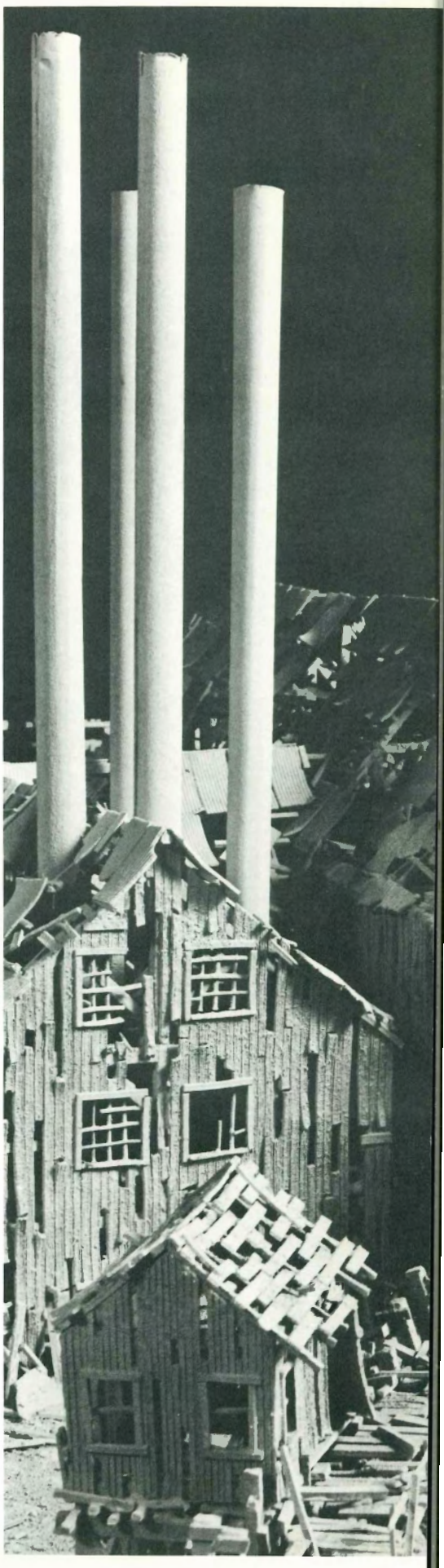
There are things to be learned from the passage of time. There's a point where you have to respect the past, the lessons of the past, and try to understand that they help the present. My mother and father saw history in a different way. They had both gone through wars and deprivation; they knew that things are built up and things die. Growing up, I was taught not to waste, but to repair things. America has traditionally torn down its old buildings to build new ones. In a way, Americans have disregarded the past. A lot of my work deals with an attitude American people

have unconsciously chosen to ignore. And a lot of my work romanticizes the past. I wish I was a nastier person, so I could make the work less romantic, but I do love the past. Yet the message is more like: "Look, we built this in the past, we let it decay, we let it break down, we destroyed it, and what do we have to show for it?" Historians have documented what they consider significant architecture—like churches and brownstones—but factories are what made America great, yet they are the quickest to be discarded. I like what you might call the "common culture," and industrial structures are part of what I saw when I was a kid. I could connect with them and make something out of that. The hardest thing to realize in making art is that it really has to come from some sort of personal source—not only physical, but emotional and symbolic. Then it's a matter of somehow tying that in, making your connection, with the world at large. As an artist, you have a social responsibility to the world. It's not enough to retreat into your environment; it's somehow important and necessary to illuminate the world we live in.

As a child, I learned about original sin in religion class. We had it perfect as human beings, we had everything we wanted and then we threw it away. The dome for me became a metaphor or symbol for that idea of the perfect past. We've always had this tendency to say that the past was perfect. So the dome, which is representative of this perfect past, is now decayed, broken down. I started with the dome as a pure object or idea and then started building a relationship with it. At the same time I was constructing these water towers. When I put the two things together—the manmade industrial structures next to a larger dome—the dome assumed a metaphor for "in time we build." It also came to represent a more natural or harmonious way of living or dealing with the environment. Earth was perfect before man came; we've built our monuments which in time will decay. Our present decays and our past will then be built on, and so on. In the long run, the earth is going back to cinder.

What I wanted to do was to force people to deal with this ambiguity. The domes are foremost in these constructions in terms of my ideas. Without the domes, people can dismiss my work as only a model. (Some people look at my work and say, "Oh this is photorealism," or "it's wood," or "it's a model.") They get trapped if they buy the realist label, because then they are forced to deal with these sort of alien white structures, the domes, in terms of the environment. Sometimes they don't work; sometimes the domes look like adjuncts, sometimes they dominate. But nonetheless, it forces people to deal with a ghost image, a memory maybe, a mood, or something nonspecific. I look at the domes as sort of a low-key hook.

I think abstraction grows out of reality. I want to take my structures now and push them into a new category—one that is evocative or familiar, but not specific. I want to approach realism from a new angle, maybe more surrealistic, more abstract. Industrial landscapes have always had that futuristic vision. Max Ernst and Mark Rothko and other abstract artists always started with reality as the base, and from reality they were able to distill abstraction. I look at my work as moving toward abstraction, getting closer to a purity, or an essence, of what my initial experiences were. I like realism in that sense—it's given me the foundation. Much like pottery gave me the foundation to go into sculpture, realism has given me the foundation and competence to go into the next step of abstraction. Taking this step will also give me more latitude to play with form, texture, and color. What I would like is in some fashion to push my



(Detail) #18 Sawmill *(1982: work in progress), 31" x 48" x 96" (79 x 122 x 244 cm), ceramic with oil. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

work toward a dream landscape.
People say the work is sculpture, which is a broad category, but I call it landscape. The person who started the whole thing was Giacometti, when he did very thin figures on a slab of bronze that implied landscape; landscape became as important as the objects on the landscape. In theater, I always made little models for the sets, but I always treated it as landscape. It may have been an interior landscape in a proscenium. What I've really done is removed the proscenium. I look at the work as maybe shadow boxes without the box. I don't know if that's sculpture in a true sense—it deals with flat planes—but I think of it as sculptural.
I don't think of myself as part of a movement in mainstream art; my work is really on the fringe. But I think it has quality and integrity and eventually people will accept it for what it's worth. What's fascinating about art is how it's come to be dominated by fashion. The sensibility of having a new line every fall, spring, and summer has entered the artworld, much like it has entered the music world—it's geared toward consumerism as opposed to quality. Ultimately, art *is* a product. You can surround it with all this mumbo jumbo that critics and dealers do, but ultimately it's for sale. There are too many people who take themselves seriously about art. I know so many artists who are tormented about art and what it means to society, and I think that is just bullshit. You just do it and that's it. I get a kick out of the fact that I make models, for want of a better term. People ask me what I do and I either say I'm a landlord or that I make model railroads. You just have to stand back and laugh at what you do.

Susan Wechsler is a free-lance writer and the author of Low-Fire Ceramics: A New Direction in American Clay.

Two views of Fictif #9 *(1981), 14" x 24" x 24" (36 x 61 x 61 cm), ceramic with acrylic. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

Clay Roots & Routes

Dale Ruff

Potter Dale Ruff, age 41, came to clay after deserting political science and the limitations of easel painting at about age 35. He writes:
I have two kids who are the most important thing in my life and whom I teach to sense themselves as the latest wave of people who have continuously inhabited this land for over 30,000 years. In the hills I can see from my window, carved stone effigies 15,000 years old have been found. This is our heritage, too. I am of course an incorrigible radical from the sixties, having hit the barricades, marched, and struggled. I lived in the mountains while the kids were younger, trying to be a subsistence dirt farmer in Oregon. As a radical, I thrive on breaking rules, challenging laws. When I entered the ceramic world in 1975, the only rules were: don't make functional pottery and don't taint your art with the outmoded struggle for beauty. For that reason, I discovered renewed virtues in pottery and take my stand by making work which is comprehensible to ordinary people (as well as other artists, who tend to be my main collectors) and to people of many different cultures and *which stubbornly refuses to conform to the canons. Between the sterile polarities of mass and elite, I am trying to wedge the historical reality of a counter-culture which now sees the renewal of tradition as an ally of social change. I just got my MFA with Soldner at Claremont. I am trying to make good pottery and to refute the myth of the inarticulate grunt potter.*

When a man puts his hand in the earth, he makes a marriage with it.
Wendell Berry

Clay art, when it does not chameleonlike disguise itself or go whoring for mainstream success at the cost of its own identity, is an art of empathy and contact, irretrievably linked to the poetics of intimate space. And yet, paradoxically, because it is of all arts the most elemental and the most abstract, it has functioned across both cultural and temporal barriers as a universal language. "Mainstream" art, on the other hand, in its preoccupation with formal issues, has restricted its audience to a narrow caste of intellectuals and tastemakers. The vanguard has been elevated to the status of official culture for the social elites of late capitalist pluralism. For that reason, it has become a contradiction in terms: a revolution that has become its opposite, a tradition betrayed, a star system, and therefore—for everyone but those with a vested interest—an insult and a bore.
As an alternative, clay art rejects the fatuous vanguardism of the art establishment in order to rediscover, and in some cases reinvent, the idea of an art of the people, connected not only to the aesthetics of everyday life and to the common earth, but to the churning hunger of all human beings for dignity and justice. This language (the speech of what Kurt Schwitters called "world-patriotism") not only bridges cultural differences and spans the evolution of human culture, but—because it is the idiom of contemporary artists, immersed in their time—it connects the visionary accomplishments of the space age (which only yesterday was an adolescent fantasy) with the profound nostalgia for earthly roots of a mobile and uprooted population. Clay, as a contemporary art form, is a connective tissue between the need for *terra firma* as the ground of our being and the primordial otherness of space. This critical connection, whose membrane is the vessel's living wall, has been entrusted in no other medium so explicitly and so compellingly as in contemporary pottery. As an intermediary between postmodern technology and the natural world, clay is an essential interface for contemporary man: awakening the repressed memory of a vital, organic fusion of the flesh and the earth, the earth and the universe.

earth, is this not what you desire from us, the invisible re-arising:
the earth, re-arising in us?
Rainer Maria Rilke

The alchemical image of man arising directly out of the earth suggests a heretical eruption of a universal theme (we owe our existence to nature directly, not to a hoary god in white robe) within the dualistic culture of Europe and suggests that the origins of contemporary pottery, insofar as there is a European heritage, lies in the dissident and despised traditions that elite modernism has rejected. The new image of reality that postmodern pottery has created calls forth the vision of a transformed state of being beyond the dichotomies and prejudices of modernism, connected not only to the past but to the future, not only to tradition but to revolution.

Those who advodate the assimilation of ceramics to the current mainstream are in danger of forsaking the subversive function of pottery both as a critique of and challenge to the mainstream and as a model of postmodern order. The perception of pottery as a vehicle of subversive art rests on a redefinition of tradition itself as a subversive force against the homogenizing result of mainstream pluralism (in which everything becomes visual information). Pottery, which yields its inner nature only through the integration of vision, gesture, memory, and function, suggests the tangible possibility of a realm of experience, a structure of satisfactions, beyond the superficial liberties of a bankrupt modernism and beyond the

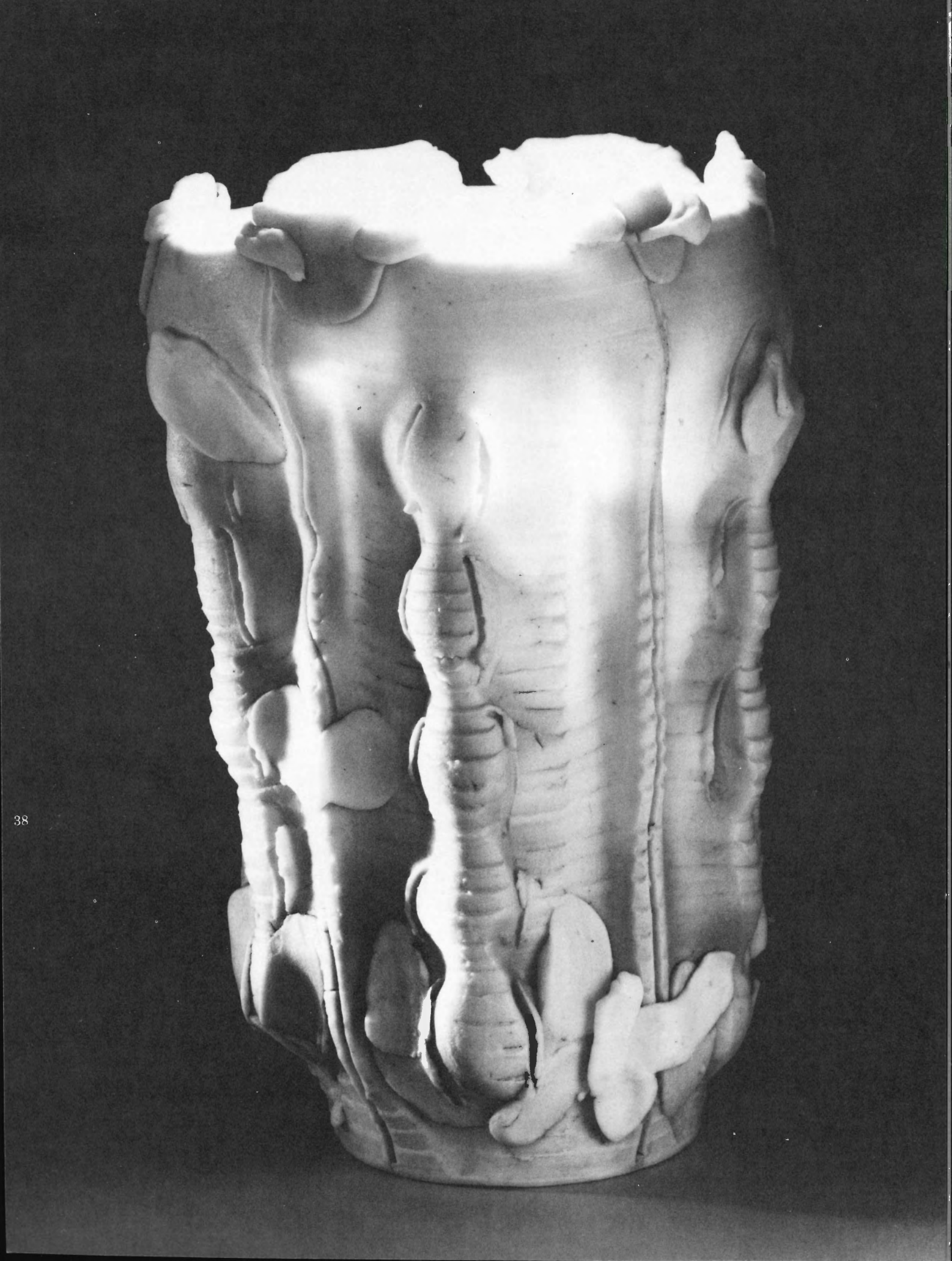
repressive historical reality of the status quo.
In order for pottery in the eighties to fulfill these transcultural functions, it must assert its own identity as a self-sufficient art form, independent of the debilitating European inheritance, which demands that pottery must either accept inferior status as inevitable or ape approved art styles. The root of this independence from the insular dialectics of art history and the insidious Cult of the New (which follows in its wake) is the profound identification with the earth which the new generation of vessel makers feels and which they find at the very heart of the native American tradition of clay, once again in a state of inspiring renewal and—for the first time—a seminal influence on contemporary art.

The earth and I are of one mind.
Chief Joseph

The inherent sensitivity of clay makes of clay art an inevitable register of the fugitive gesture, which Baudelaire identified as the content of modern art. But for clay romantics of the eighties, the European connection is dated, operating only through the *outré* traditions of alchemy and the earlier evolution in the 1950s out of Abstract Expressionism. This suggests that for the contemporary potter—post-functional, post-Otis, post-process, and post-modern—the source of the most vital work is the spirit of the land itself. When, in *Self-Reliance,* Emerson urged Americans to declare their cultural independence from the tyranny of European traditions, he did not sufficiently appreciate that in turning to the land itself we would discover not an empty and wild continent, but an ancient civilization, arising out of the earth, struggling to survive the genocidal encroachment of the West. The contemporary potter confronts simultaneously the unparalleled beauty of the land and the overwhelming evidence of its degradation. At this juncture, the visionary and ecological perspective of the vessel maker meets the lived ecology and visionary traditions of native American culture.

Passage to more than India!
Are thy wings
plumed indeed for such flights!
O secret of earth and sky!
Of you o waters of the sea!
O winding creeks and rivers!
Of you o woods and fields!
Of you strong mountains of my land!
Of you o prairies!
Of you gray rocks!
O morning red! O clouds!
O rain and snows!
O day and night passage to you!
O sun and moon and all you stars!
Sirius and Jupiter!
Passage to you!
Walt Whitman

In *A Century of American Ceramics,* Garth Clark devotes two brief and preemptive sentences to the significance of the native clay tradition. The Europeans who settled America, he observes, were not influenced by this "magnificent" pottery tradition. The core of contemporary clay art, by contrast—because it is intimately associated with the earth, is conceptual, and alludes to the timelessness of beginnings—looks to the indigenous tradition as a heritage. For this reason, postmodern potters see in the acknowledgment of native roots the foundations for independence and a way of grounding contemporary pottery in a sense of place. The humble pot, which summons up the memory of origins, becomes a vehicle for recording and interpreting the centrifugal vision of interplanetary man. This recognition and appreciation of native culture, and the declaration of independence from the intimidating European-American mainstream it implies, is the keynote of the current resurgence of vessel making. The contemporary potter—whatever his background—is liberated from the exhausted traditions of the Old World (and the residue of classism, sexism, and ageism) and the spurious claims of a post facto fabricated history in order to rediscover and redefine his own heritage. The acknowledgment of a native clay tradition provides the basis for a vital contemporary pottery capable of connecting the holistic perspective of this indigenous culture to the vertiginous vision of space-age man.
The space defined by the contemporary vessel is no longer merely the circumscribed, finite space of the static vessel, standing its ground, but now incorporates the space encompassed by the trajectory of the vessel hurtling through the infinite wilderness of interplanetary space, a space defined not only by the Hopi creation myth (which locates space travel in the past), not only by Whitman's prophetic *Passage to More than India,* but by the paradoxes of postmodern physics. From the point of view of a world clay culture, Europe is the hinterlands; its perspective is both backward and sterile. One of Robert Arneson's satirical evocations of a toilet is entitled *The European Contribution to Ceramics,* both a play on Duchamp's famous remark about plumbing being the only American art form and a repudiation of the historicizing claims of European-based art. For many older clay artists, the alternative to the European prejudice was Oriental aesthetics. Today, many of the younger potters have their roots in rock culture. The synthesis of primitive simplicity and sophisticated interpretation that is the genius of native pottery finds an analogue in the culture that has grown up around rock music. Like rock, pottery is based on a ritual beat that asserts the primacy of the physical response and the playful repetition of basic, anticipated structures. These structures assert, in turn, the subsoil of the communal consciousness out of which individuality emerges and into which it returns. Sly Stone's sixties classic—*Everybody Is a Star*—manifests this idea musically. The communal matrix of pottery, like that of rock, combines tradition and innovation and, like rock, pottery is experienced not as the repressive compulsion of habit or history, but as the joyful liberation of eros. The physical sensuousness of pure clay art ties it not only to the radical hedonism of rock and the geo-erotic mysticism of native culture, but to the attitudes of contemporary dance. As a response to and an ally of rock culture, claywork expresses body consciousness as gesture and interaction. The palpable reality of clay demands not only interpretation but direct response—physical, visceral, empathic—and this intimate contact (the liturgy of everyday use) grants the vessel the metaphorical power to transform the cold information of art into direct and passionate experience. The transition from information to experience is the subversive function of pottery within the contemporary context. The fragmented identity of contemporary man finds in recent pottery a crystalization, a synthesis, of traditional virtues, radical intentions, an ancient clay ecology, cosmic visions, and an indigenous rock culture that is simultaneously primitive and electronic, archaic and postmodern. Against the dissections of history, contemporary claywork asserts the continuity of human culture. For modern man, who yearns for roots but is "free," the clay vessel is a physical idea linking the ancient past to the distant future. Clay art contains the idea of a mobile culture, en route to the stars, linked by the rituals of pottery, to the earth. For the contemporary potter, pottery making is an act of culture-building because it rediscovers, in buried and snubbed traditions, the conditions of survival and renewal.
To say that pottery today embodies an idea and a function that is both traditional and new is to suggest a redefinition of what tradition means: tradition not as a tyrannical imposition, but as a dynamic process of continuity and change. In no other time has the philosophy and art of the native cultures been taken so seriously and personally by a generation of artists. It is the synthesis of this movement with the subversive intentions of postmodern pottery which, today, defines the essential function of clay art.



Light Gatherer *(1976) by Rudolf Staffel, 9" (23 cm) high. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Frank Beader.*

(Right) Untitled *(1977) by Robert Turner, 14" (36 cm) high. Photo: Lester Mertz.*

Critical Dimensions

Louise Klemperer

In November 1980, a symposium on the "American Potter" was held at Washington State University in Pullman, concurrent with the exhibition, "The Contemporary American Potter."[1] Works from this show also appear in Garth Clark's recently published book, *American Potters: The Work of Twenty Modern Masters.* Looking at the selection of potters and vessels, listening to the speakers debate, my foremost concern became: on what basis do we make critical judgments? Are all criteria equally important, or are some more important than others? Are there any that are universally accepted, or must each critic proclaim his or her own? Discussions with some of the exhibitors, with curator Garth Clark, and with the show's organizer, Sanford Sivitz Shaman, prompted some answers, and further questions.

We all know that "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder." Yet this truism is often obscured by the authoritative voice of the critics, who give the impression that their judgments have been scientifically determined by indisputable standards. The sleight of hand at work here is that while critics may invoke accepted standards, the choice of *which* standard to invoke at a given time is extremely subjective. Critics themselves are well aware of this, but the public often forgets. I think of this subjective objectivity as Clark, Shaman, and I walk through the show.

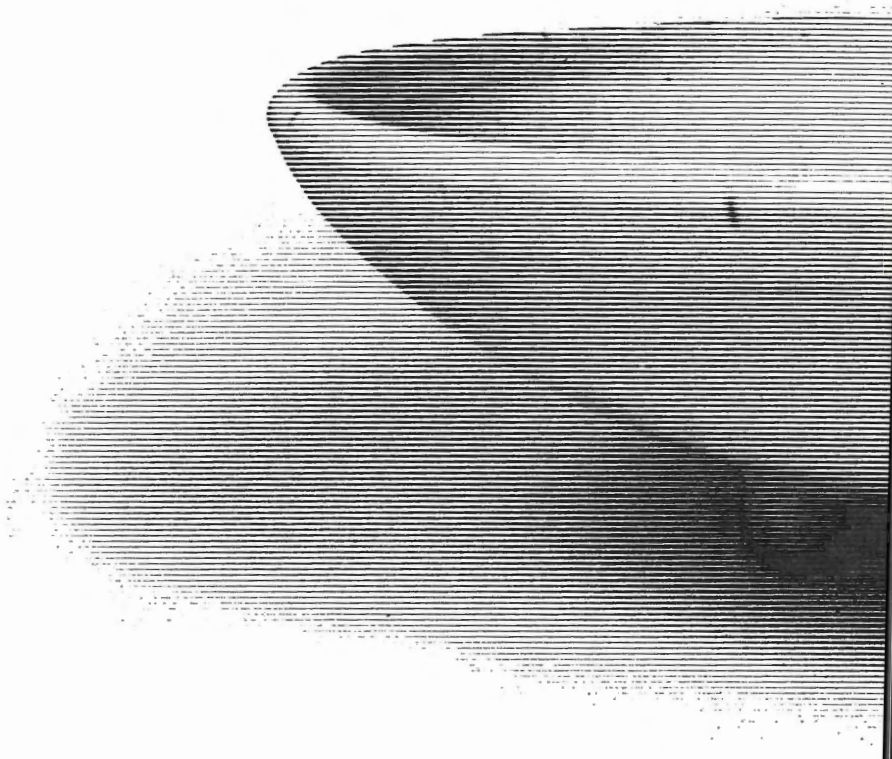
Approaching a low bowl by Warren MacKenzie, my first reaction is, "Hmm . . . glaze defect. Could easily be corrected." MacKenzie had pulled his fingers through the wet glaze in a series of small arcs, piling it up in very thick ridges between the bared areas. During firing, the glaze had cracked in many places. "Don't you feel the glaze cracks are sloppy?" I ask.

"MacKenzie studied with Bernard Leach," Clark replies, "Leach had been influenced by Japanese potters. Over there, they don't worry about such things."

So now it is a question of whether the glaze cracks add to or detract from the bowl. If the work is viewed simply as a functional bowl, the cracks are detrimental; they will harbor crumbs and dirt. Function is here defined by industrial-design

Tripod Plate *(1979) by Warren MacKenzie, 13¾" (35 cm) in diameter. Photo: Terry A. Collins.*

Two Ladies, Two Dogs *(1979) by Rudy Autio, 25" (64 cm) high. Photo: Terry A. Collins.*



criteria. But if function is defined in William Daley's terms—"something of my personal spirit which you may use for the rituals of your daily life"—then the cracks become expressive of the freedom and exuberance of the hand. Which is it, efficient bowl or personal expression? In this context it is the latter, making the cracks acceptable.

Shaman and I next walk over to a small, translucent porcelain vase by Rudolf Staffel. I see small pieces of clay slapped on haphazardly over the form. Shaman remarks, "I love Staffel's work! There's such a sense of play—a return to primitive or childlike forms."

A section of Clark's essay in the exhibition catalogue comes to my mind: "as Voulkos explains, 'the clay moves, one must learn to dance with it.' This introduced a direct physical response and spontaneity of gesture." But somehow I don't see Staffel's vase as an expression of play or as spontaneous gesture. I see several distinct parts—vertical finger impressions, applied bits of clay, strong throwing lines—each with its own pattern and rhythm. The whole seems more noteworthy as a sum of parts that do not manage to take on an organic or logical integrity, rather than as an expression of play or spontaneous gesture.

The title, *Light Gatherer,* is no help. Why this particular assemblage of translucent parts, rather than any other? I compare the *Light Gatherer* to a few nearby vessels by Rudy Autio. Here exuberantly painted nudes wind around anthropomorphic forms, sometimes in harmony, sometimes as counterpoint to their support. *This* has unity and vigor, as well as spontaneity of gesture. What comprises organic integrity? Autio's pots have similar and dissimilar elements not always in any precisely definable relationship to each other, yet the whole seems coherent. The same combination of similar and dissimilar elements may be found in Staffel's work exhibited here, but often he doesn't achieve this sense of wholeness.

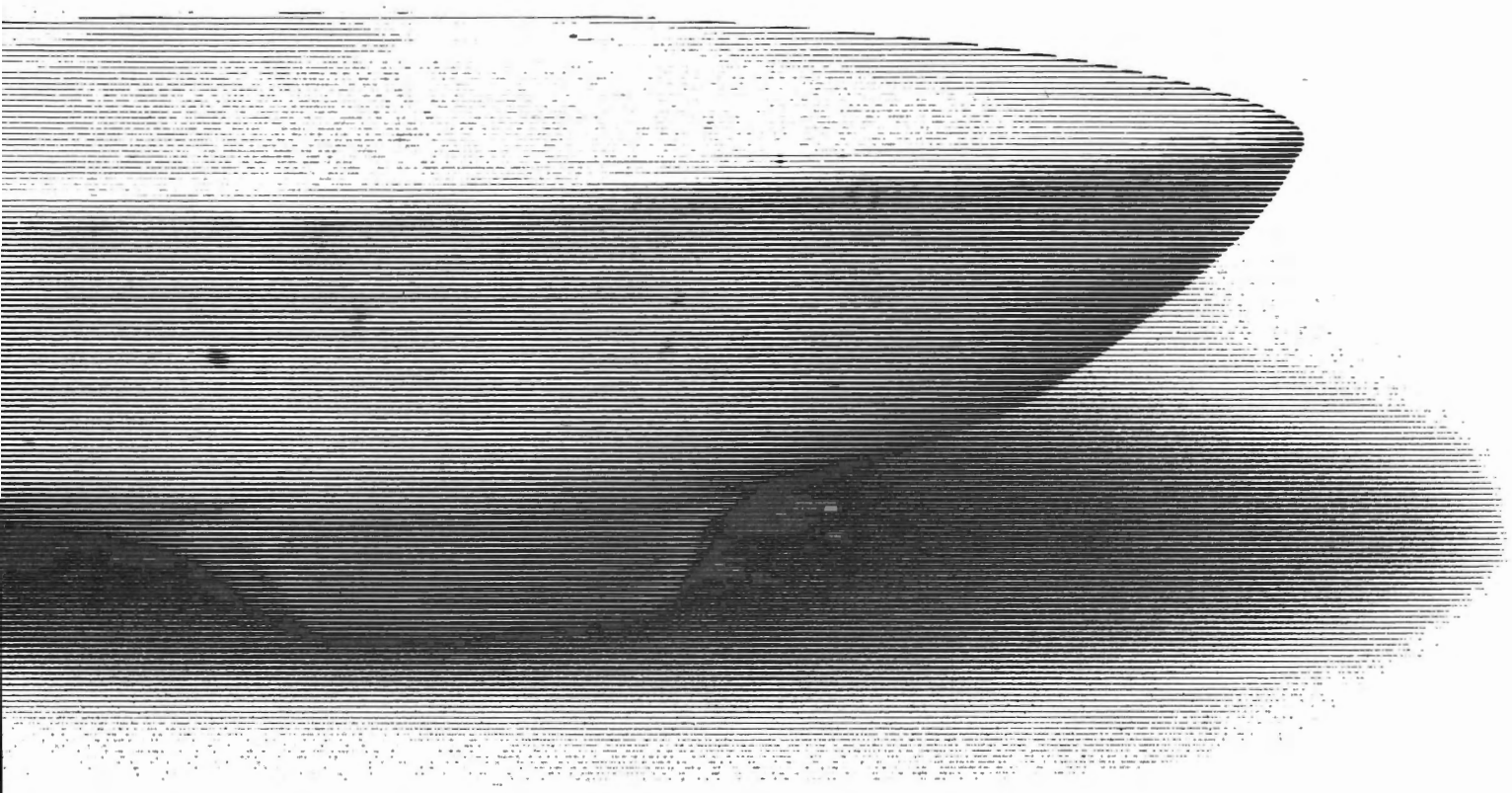
I ask Autio about the role of Abstract Expressionism as intuitive gesture in his work.

"Well," he answers, "at one time we thought a lot about Abstract Expressionism, but now I'm much more conscious of what I'm doing when I'm working. Yet, old habits and ways of moving (and so the appearance) are still there." Spontaneity modified. Although appearing as spontaneous as Autio's earlier work, the present *Ladies* are more deliberately produced. How ironic that the very gesture of spontaneity can be an artistic illusion; like the studied spontaneity of Japanese art.

Onward, to a low white bowl by MacKenzie with three carved feet. Plain . . . a minor production piece perhaps. But Shaman informs me it is one of Clark's favorites in the exhibition. Shaman is also impressed: "So simple, so elegant. Such a quiet statement. At first I thought it was pretty boring, but after looking at it repeatedly, I feel it is timeless." Shaman explains, "You have to understand that MacKenzie is very traditional; he wants to be accessible to many. The regular symmetry makes a very traditional statement, but it's very successful."

Many times during the weekend I go back to that bowl to see whether I can feel some of the curators' admiration. I have always thought it unfortunate that production potters make one product for sales, and another for shows. Besides the danger of misrepresentation in such a practice, there is the confusion of aim, of purpose. Is that the trouble here? In spite of much searching, I cannot find merit in MacKenzie's bowl. I am unsure whether it is a matter of personal taste, or a lack of time. Familiarity often changes our perception, which should be fair warning not only to critics, but to jurors. Phillip Rawson put this well when he said, "Art takes time to make, and it takes time for the viewer to reenact it."

Next in view are a series of *Pillow Pitchers* by Betty Woodman—intriguing, powerful forms combining pitcher and pillow shapes. Though Woodman's work can be appreciated on its own, greater rewards may be had by the viewer with some knowledge of ceramics history. Says the artist: "The *Pillow Pitchers* are titled after the shapes of the spouts—named for the culture from which



I borrowed them—Persian, Etruscan, and so on. Many of the forms and glazes are pretty connected to traditions, but my own viewing of them. Certainly, I make assumptions about the knowledge and experience of the people using my pieces."

While it is often said that a work of art should stand on its own—no explanations necessary—it is also characteristic of modern art to assume that the viewer is culturally astute. How much must we know?[2] MacKenzie's bowl and Woodman's pitchers give very different answers.

I next encounter a group of coffeepots, a tureen, and a casserole by Jerry Rothman. Powerful, dramatic, but strange. No Japanese subtlety here, no subordination of form to function. "That's not true," Shaman interjects, "they *can* be used." I see I have not only unquestioningly accepted "form follows function," but also the unstated corollary that certain, by now familiar forms are the only ones possible to fulfill a given function. Rothman proves me wrong. He also overrules the Bauhaus precept that some parts are more important than others, and all parts should be subordinate to the whole. This potter manages to make all parts almost equally interesting, and does so without sacrificing the whole.

I encounter another invalid preconception in viewing a vessel by Susanne Stephenson. The proportions and shape look all wrong. To me, a vessel looks "right" if it has a generous undercut at its base, which gives it visual lift. Such an undercut accentuates the pot's energetic rise in defiance of gravity. Stephenson's pot, on the other hand, seems squat, weighed down. By weekend's close, however, I smile to it as to an old friend; I find it visually interesting and strong.

A basic principle of design is tension. And a common source of tension in pottery is between the force that propels the pot's rise and the counterforce of gravity that would pull it back toward earth. This tension is accentuated by a strong undercut. Stephenson, on the other hand, achieves tension by other means—with color: warm orange against cold yellow, orange and yellow against dark blue. There is also tension between her forms'

smoothly thrown sides (evidence of a steady, careful execution) and their energetically sliced rims.

Now realizing that an undercut base is just one of many ways to achieve tension, I remember a story Paul Soldner tells of his student days with Peter Voulkos at Otis. Vivika and Otto Heino, who were teaching at a neighboring pottery school, believed pots should have "Life and Lift." One of their students, seeing the work of Voulkos and his Otis confederates, went around Voulkos's studio pointing his finger and saying, "This one doesn't have *Life,* and that one doesn't have *Lift.*"

"Dammit!" Voulkos finally snorted, "I don't want Life and Lift, I want *Death* and *Dump!*" Of course, Voulkos has plenty of life or tension in his work, but not always from an undercut base or a feeling of lift.

Later, looking over my notes at home, I see that I have not necessarily discussed the works that I felt were the strongest or the weakest of this show, but those that can be seen in a variety of contexts. In Clark's essay, I read the following quote from Michael Cardew, and am attracted to its simplicity: "Pottery is about one thing only: the majesty of form." Unfortunately, this leaves much room for interpretation, and many questions unanswered.

In establishing a universal list of visual elements that would comprise Majestic Form, some requirements seem to change with fashion, while others, such as tension and unity, seem more constant. Cardew's attempt to link pottery to abstract sculpture has one further drawback: it eliminates *meaning.* Is pottery less concerned with meaning than other arts? I think not. Function as one meaning is, of course, given. But there begins to be as much diversity of meanings and references in contemporary vessels as in the other arts. The underlying questions then become: how much is our perception of form affected by visual elements, and how much by interpretation of these references, and who shall interpret?

A thorough criticism must combine formal analysis of some sort, the interpretations of the critic, the context of the artist's life and intentions, and the larger cultural context. But each critic has different perceptions of the object and of which meanings and contexts seem relevant, not to mention varying criteria of excellence. So while we may look to critical writings to enrich our perceptions, we will never find a single, definitive viewpoint. Discussing "The Contemporary American Potter" with the show's curator, organizer, and some of its exhibiting potters has clarified for me these inevitable sources of relativism in contemporary criticism.

1. This exhibition is currently touring under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Future dates include: Huntsville Museum, Alabama (July 10-August 8); Weil Gallery, Corpus Christi State University, Texas (September 4–October 3); Lehigh-Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin (October 23–December 5).
2. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see: Michael McTwigan, "First Things First: Some Second Thoughts on How We View Clay Today," *American Ceramics* 1 (Winter 1982).

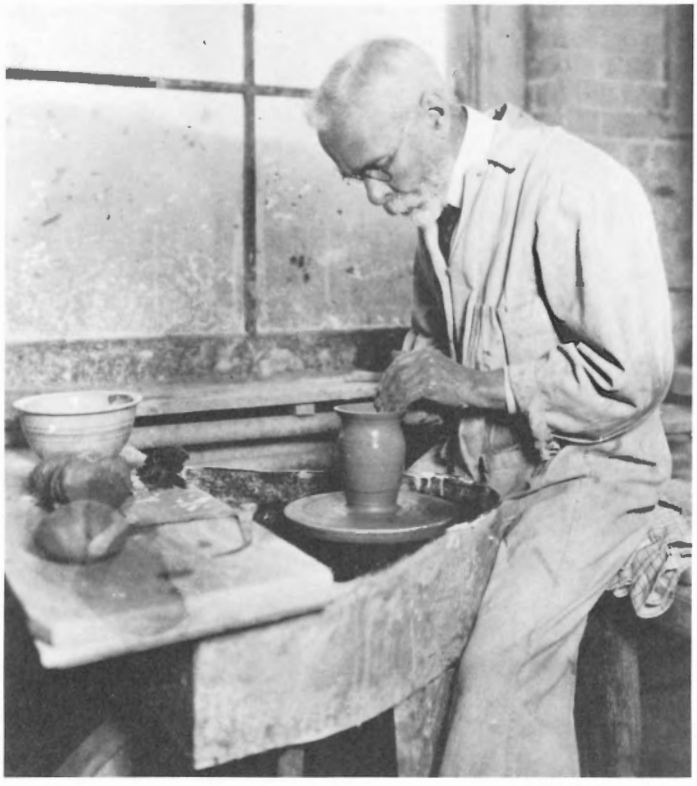
Louise Klemperer, a free-lance critic, teaches design at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, Portland.

Cut Edge Form *(1979) by Susanne Stephenson, 12" (30 cm) high. Photo: Terry A. Collins.*

Bicentennial Tureen *(1976) by Jerry Rothman, 20" (51 cm) high.*

The Searching Flame:

Susan R. Strong



Binns at the wheel (ca. 1925).

Charles Fergus Binns was born in 1857 while his mother and father were living at The Poplars in Worcester, England. He grew up in an atmosphere of culture and artistic endeavor. His father, Richard William Binns, who was the well-known director of the Royal Worcester Porcelain Works for forty-five years, shared his love for pottery with his children. Years later, Charles remembered well "how his eyes glowed at the thought that I should follow him in the pursuit of his beloved art."[1] Charles was the fifth of nine children. "A big house was essential and the family grew up at Diglis House on the banks of the River Severn in Worcester, where old trees and thick grass, a paddock for a pony, their mothers' aviary, and the rambling house running over with children, cats, dogs and a parrot, made the much-loved background of their lives."[2] Binns reminisced:

We had a large garden at that time and employed a gardener. The modern lawn mower had not yet been invented and I remember well the swish of the scythe as the man shaved the lawn in the morning dew. We had a deep cold frame for growing cucumbers and Ben the gardener used to sit inside this to eat his lunch of bread and cheese or bacon. Many a time I sat with him and watched the operation. Sometimes I accepted a morsel or two almost as a ceremony.[3]

The children were first taught by governesses, then (as the family grew) by the older sisters; the older boys were sent to the Worcester Cathedral King's School. Binns's recollections of the King's School classroom were vivid.

Connected with the Cathedral at Worcester is the Collegiate School . . . which is, or then was, supposed to be preparatory for Oxford or Cambridge. Part of this school is an endowed foundation through which forty boys can obtain free tuition. The only requisite is the passing of a simple examination. I say "simple" because, tho I do not remember of what it consisted, I passed it at the age of ten and was admitted a "King's Scholar." What's in a name? I was provided with a college cap, familiarly called a mortar board, and sent to school. There were perhaps two hundred boys in all. . . .
The class of boys assembles. They are not all of the same age but are arranged rather by ability, real or pretended. The head of the class is at the end of the bench at the master's right hand and the others are seated in order as they were at the close of the previous lesson. Let us suppose that this is a class in latin translation and that the head boy begins Virgil's Aeneid, "Arma; the arms, virumque, and the man, cano, I sing" he begins glibly enough but now he hesitates. He has memorised so far and now trusts to luck. Immediately the boy next to him holds out his hand claiming the right to continue. It is now up to the master. If he wants to give the first boy a chance he allows him to flounder for a while but sooner or later he nods to the second who takes up the tale and if he should succeed where the first has failed he "takes him down," that is, he takes the first place and the other becomes second.
I am speaking, of course, of the methods and conditions which prevailed in the distant past. Judging them by modern standards they seem to leave much to be desired but there was one feature which I think calls for comment, a feature which has always been characteristic of English education. It puts the matter squarely up to the boy. The master is, in fact, more of a judge and critic than a teacher. The boy makes his preparation and the master tests him

Charles Fergus Binns

out. . . . Suppose the assignment is a passage in one of the Latin authors which is to be translated into English. First you look up each word in the Latin–English dictionary. This may be quite difficult because some of the words have a nasty habit of changing their first letter when they change their mood or tense or case. The words being written out in order you try to arrange them so as to make sense in English. Failing this you think up some boy in the class who is a shark in Latin. Sweats or swots we used to call them. Often they were physical weaklings who could easily be licked. "Tell me the meaning of this or I'll punch your head" was a common phrase. But in the evening when the lesson was urgent such tactics could not prevail because the victim was at his own home. So bribery was in order. Equipping yourself with an apple or a piece of candy or a few choice marbles you made a friendly call and acquired the necessary information for value recieved.
Now and then the master would spring a surprise in calling for a translation sight unseen. Then it was that the slaughter began and when the smoke cleared away the bespectacled weaklings were seated triumphantly at the head of the class and the husky football players were at the foot. . . .
When I arrived at the fifth class I was told that I was to have no more schooling but must go to work.[4]

Although he was apprenticed at fourteen to the Royal Worcester Porcelain Works, he continued to study chemistry and art, foreshadowing the two great themes of his life. He studied art at the Worcester School of Design; however, at that time chemistry was not taught in Worcester so he traveled to a private laboratory in the nearby city of Birmingham. Soon a laboratory was equipped at the factory and chemical control of operations was attempted. Some of the results of his experiments with bodies and glazes were displayed in Paris in 1878. He was placed in one department after another in order to become familiar with the whole process of manufacture; his father wished to prepare Charles to become director after him. From the chemistry department, he moved to take charge of the painters in the art department.
In 1884, two years after his marriage, he was sent to London to manage the sales office, where he remained for nine years. Little is known about his years as salesman. John McMahon, who knew Binns well, had difficulty visualizing him happy in that position.[5] Certainly the selling of pottery was the least of Binns's interests. Still it was this period which led to his becoming a popular lecturer and, perhaps through that, a teacher. He studied the art collections in the London museums and prepared slide lectures—"Notes on the History and Manufacture of Pottery and Porcelain" (1894) and "Notes on Glass & Glass Making" (1894)—which are in the Archives of the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, although the slides are lost. He lectured at many institutions in England.
His position in the sales office also sent him for a fateful visit to America, accompanying the Worcester exhibit to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, where he "began to appreciate the opportunities offered in the new land."[6] He lectured during that visit and quickly made the acquaintance of Americans interested in china painting and ceramics, including Walter Scott Lenox, a fortuitous meeting which led to Binns's first job in America five years later. On his return to England he was recalled to the factory at Worcester to take up the management of manufacturing operations. His American contacts persisted; in September of 1896, he began writing a column each month for *The Ceramic Monthly,* an American magazine.
The move to America was a momentous decision that must have been difficult. Binns's wife, Mary, always thought of England and Ireland as "home," a home to which the family would never return. Binns's own explanation is brief and brave—"I decided to experiment with the possibilities of the United States"[7]—but several years of worry lay behind it. The pottery industry was in decline in England. When the management of the Worcester Works changed in 1897, Binns resigned and left England with the hope of finding a brighter future in America.
By October of 1897 he had reached New York; his family waited in England. "He spent a long, lonely winter as far south as Virginia and west again to Chicago, lecturing and writing, trying to make a dollar do the work of a pound, and hunting for an opening."[8] Trenton Potteries Co. (Trenton, N.J.), Robertson Art Tile Co. (Morrisville, Pa.), Ceramic Art Co. (Trenton), John Maddock Sons (Trenton) and Mercer Pottery (Trenton) were companies he advised from 1897 to 1899.
In the spring of 1898, he found a permanent position with Lenox and cabled for his family to join him in America. "I undertook the principalship of the newly founded school of ceramic art in Trenton, New Jersey, where I conducted evening classes. During the daylight hours I found employment at the Ceramic Art Company, now Lenox Inc."[9]
Binns became active in the profession immediately and his reputation grew. During his two years at Trenton, the American Ceramic Society was organized by pottery manufacturers impatient with the secret recipes and trial-and-error methods of the past, who wished to introduce scientific methods. His convictions were already so well known that he was asked to join in its creation and was at the initial meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in 1899. The first year he was elected a member of the governing board, the second year he became vice-president, and the third year, president. At that time, Ross Purdy recalled,

ceramic knowledge was meager. There was a considerable number of recipes for definite purposes. The materials named were not generally available and often were in a vernacular not generally known. Beginnings had been made by Seger, Langenbeck and Orton in the reduction of these recipes to molecular ratios. There was very little understanding of the chemical and physical relations . . . very little application of engineering fundamentals to ceramic manufacturing.[10]

Another friend explains Binns's efforts to dispel this ignorance of scientific methods and reluctance to share information.

He promoted the scientific approach to glaze study and contributed much to our early knowledge regarding the relation of body to glaze. His contributions along this line from then on were enough to make him an outstanding ceramist. To him goes a great deal of the credit for our present understanding of glaze formulas and the parts played by various ingredients in the production of glazed ware.[11]

By 1899 his father was in frail health. He writes in a thin and shaky hand from England and ends his letter thus: "Ching is looking at me while I write & I doubt not would send his love to the family if he were able to speak. I take him for a walk

Vase *(1924), 9" (23 cm) high. Courtesy New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Photo: Paul Gignac.*

occasionally when the day is fine and he appreciates it immensely. I am afraid I must bring my effort to a close for the present as my fingers are stiff." Even so, the love and enthusiasm for pottery that he shared with his son is expressed fervently in a prophetic letter that was certainly one of his last.

I am now making an effort as I must congratulate you with the position you have taken in the Pottery Congress and the interesting account you have given of it. I should much like to have been present as I do love to see enthusiasm in the cause of Pottery. It is so rare to meet with people who appreciate it beyond the question of buying and selling. . . .
The movement [American Ceramic Society] with the proposed publications you speak of must awaken the thoughts of intelligent men who are not tied to old rule of thumb practices used by their grandfathers. There is no knowing what new bodies may be brought out of the new field of American clays, reviving the expectations of 150 years ago.[12]

In spite of his growing reputation, "the two years in Trenton were not happy ones. Intensely hard work as superintendent of a factory by day and as principal of the Art School in the evening brought Mr. Binns a precarious living. His wife had a serious illness; the children were looked upon as aliens in school."[13] "A new life began when President Davis of Alfred University visited Mr. Binns in 1900 and, as Mrs. Binns always said, after eating a good dinner with her special jam pudding for dessert, offered him the position of Director of the newly created department of Ceramics at Alfred."[14] At that time, President Davis related, "there was a dearth of men with technical knowledge, supplemented by a cultural background and training sufficient to justify placing them in charge of technical training of college grade. By accident I learned, through a member of the newly organized American Ceramic Society, of Charles Fergus Binns."[15] Davis visited him twice, was favorably impressed, and decided that "here was our man." In this way Charles Binns became the first director of the second state school of ceramics in the United States.
Charles T. Harris, lessee of the local Celadon Terra Cotta Co., and John J. Merrill, alumnus and tax commissioner in Albany, first suggested a clay-working school for Alfred University in 1897. They reasoned that the students could get practical experience in the terra-cotta plants in town. President Boothe Davis wished to broaden the offerings of the university; he supported their idea and in 1899 the trustees began to discuss the matter with the legislature. Binns explained later:

At that time the chief thought which ruled ceramic education was brick. The solons at Albany had to be told that the raw materials of the State should be more fully utilized, that better building material should be produced, and that, therefore, the school should be established. It was forgotten, or perhaps had not then been announced, that the chief raw material lies in terms of human beings and that the proper product of all education is men and women.[16]

The new school was indeed justified as Binns described. The argument rested on the undeveloped resources of the state in clays and shales, the enormous imports of fine ceramic wares from

Europe, and the necessity for trained clayworkers who could use native clays and produce native wares. There was wide support for the school and the legislation passed easily. Governor Teddy Roosevelt signed the bill establishing the New York State School of Clay-Working and Ceramics at Alfred University on April 12, 1900.

Not everyone supported the plan. The New York *Sun* complained early in 1900: "state education has run mad. . . .Why the people of the State of New York should be taxed to teach pupils how to make pots and vases at Alfred University, or anywhere else for the matter of it, is a puzzle which does not admit of any very satisfactory solution."[17]

Binns was well qualified for his new task. At the time of his appointment, he was regarded as the leading authority on ceramics in the country. He had already taught and thought about teaching in Trenton for two years and even this "most discouraging period of my whole career" proved valuable. "If it had not been for that experience of American manufacturing methods I should not have been qualified to take up the work [at Alfred]."[18]

Binns told Pond: "This school was the first, and for a long time the only one, to pay any attention at all to the development of the potter's art, and in this country there are few enterprises in this field which cannot trace their roots, directly or indirectly, to Alfred. Much of this, I am glad to recognize, is due to loyal and enthusiastic co-workers."[19] Paul Cox confirmed this view of Alfred's role when he wrote that Binns "was chosen for the Alfred post because it was hoped that the Alfred school would always be different from other hard-boiled engineering schools."[20] Attention to the development of the potter's art is the unique and great contribution that Binns and, through him, Alfred made to American ceramics. According to Ted Randall, Alfred faculty member and grandson of the editor of *The Clay Worker,*

[Binns] was already well known as connoisseur, writer, and lecturer on ceramic art and a recognized designer in porcelain and stoneware, and perhaps the only member of the intelligentsia of the time who had mastered the potter's wheel. So of course the Alfred program would be a little different from all the others. In his first publication announcing the new Alfred program in "clay working," Binns said, "No branch of study can stand alone—it is the purpose of this school to educate the student of clay working in collateral fields of science and art."

For some time the "synthesis of art and science" has been an overly visible lecture and debating topic, but not so much in the early 1900s. Those were times of strict schism between fine and applied art—before craft concepts and even design concepts had entered the academic mind and when most school men would have felt the inclusion of art in a science curriculum or science in an art curriculum to be impure, pointless, or impossible.[21]

Alfred's success was very much Binns's success. He joined chemistry to art and created the studio potter. There had been isolated experiments by persons who wanted to throw on the wheel, and not just decorate blanks, but customarily pottery was formed by one person and glazed or painted by another. Binns himself was trained in this tradition of division of labor; John McMahon believes that, for all his experience, he had probably never thrown a pot himself before he started the program at Alfred.[22] But this disjunction of form and decoration was rejected; Binns demanded that the student create the whole. He dismissed china painting as trivial; it was a practice he did not care to defend. As for molded vases "produced in numbers as alike as peas in one pod," he scoffed, "Think of demanding of a painter that he duplicate his pictures, so that one might hang one each side of the mantel!"[23] Binns looked forward to a time "when the emancipated artisan shall become the artist."[24]

Arthur Baggs, Paul Cox, Guy Cowan, Adelaide Alsop Robineau, Elizabeth Overbeck, Mary Chase Perry Stratton, Harold Nash, Fred Walrath, and Ruth Canfield were only a few of his dedicated and influential students. They went out to teach others and carried his high artistic standards, respect for material, and classic aesthetic beliefs across America.

It has been pointed out that the merging of chemistry and art into the creation of the studio potter was revolutionary, but there was another, equally important element of Binns's powerful influence: his noble, humane vision of the artist conveyed through his thoughtful eloquence, both in the classroom and far beyond. His reach was broad, for he wrote and lectured constantly, particularly in his first twenty years at Alfred. His many writings give insight into his philosophy of pottery: rigorous yet loving. He had a vision of beauty and accomplishment for American ceramics which he urged on potters and industry. Paul Cox recollected:

I know that Binns was said by Bleininger to be the most cultured man in the ceramic profession. . . .I know that he was the first man to appreciate Karl Langenbeck and that he was loyally generous toward all men who worked to broaden ceramic knowledge. I know that he loved Alfred and its quiet life as only a scholar can love a scholarly environment. I know that he has reached more people with his writings than any other ceramist that ever lived because he made ceramic work understandable to people who cannot attend college.[25]

This is borne out by an examination of his publications. They taught new skills and reached for a new audience, urging science and art onto the potter's craft. He edited *Ceramic Technology,* which was published in 1897, 1898, and 1901 in London. *The Manual of Practical Potting* was also edited by Binns; it must have filled a need, for it was reprinted for the fourth time in 1907. The preface notes that the sole aim is to render the book "so complete in every particular that it might become to be universally regarded as the chief text-book for reference wherever the manufacture of ceramics is followed. . . .The various formulae now published for the first time are the outcome of years of study and repeated experiment on the part of several members of the trade." *The Story of the Potter*, first published in 1897 in London, was also reprinted at least twice. Binns's preface asserts that most histories of pottery "are either too voluminous or too advanced for the average reader. . . .'The Story of the Potter' has been written in the endeavour to render into popular language the most fascinating of all histories." And his first project for the American Ceramic Society was to prepare the *Manual of Ceramic Calculations* with Edward Orton and William Zimmer in 1900.

Binns had been brought up in a great porcelain factory (albeit soft-paste porcelain) and had put his hand to Belleek his first year in America; he "tried to improve Belleek and [later] stated. . .that the perfect cannot be improved."[26] He was ever an advocate for

porcelain. It was rarely made in America and he felt that American potteries were neglecting a wonderful area of work. At that time, he was forced to say that "porcelain is an exotic in this country." It must be for this reason that he contributed a chapter to Taxile Doat's *Grand Feu Ceramics: A Practical Treatise on the Making of Fine Porcelain and Grès,* published in 1905. Binns's chapter describes sources and preparation of American clays for porcelain and *grès* (stoneware).

The Potter's Craft, published in 1910, was recognized as a pioneering text. It was reprinted in 1922, 1947, and 1967. Its preface acknowledges the revolution in pottery (that Binns helped create) and reveals again his love of teaching and the sharing of knowledge: "this book is the outcome of an experience extending over a period of thirty-six years. Twenty years ago it would have been impossible, for the science of ceramics was not then born. Ten years ago it would have been wasted, for the Artist-potter in America had not arrived, but now the individual workers are many and the science is well established." He also published over two hundred and fifty articles in at least twenty-one periodicals and published a monthly column for seven years.

Binns's early years were completely involved in painted porcelain and he shared basic aesthetic attitudes and a passion for ceramics with his father. As late as 1923 he described himself as one who "always had been and always will be a white-ware man."[27] Furthermore, he promoted the value of porcelain to American manufacturers with energy and sincerity. It is notable, however, that his own work was finely glazed stoneware. In 1928 he wrote to Theodore Pond (in the letter quoted above), "about twenty years ago I began to experiment in the production of a special ware which should express my own ideals of design and craftsmanship. Not being a skilled draughtsman, I decided to attempt a product in a technique allied to that of the French artist potters. Thus was evolved the stoneware which you have seen." It appears that both Robineau and Binns were influenced by their acquaintance with Taxile Doat's work in the high-fire wares. Binns, unlike Robineau, preferred stoneware for its substantial, masculine body. Like a poet choosing the sonnet form, Binns was challenged by the intensity of the high fire and the limited number of "coloring oxides" that could survive it, a limited number that for Binns could be combined in almost endless variety.

Many of Binns's students and colleagues have asserted that he was crucially influential and highly admired as an educator. One should not forget that his compelling personality rested on his joy in pottery. His pottery was his lifework—dignified, simple, perfect pots, formed with great care, destroyed if judged imperfect. In one of his earliest articles, published in 1894, he states:

In every department of artistic work we demand that the executant shall exhibit perfect control over his material; this is, in fact, the germ and essence of artistic practice. . . .The docile clay is obedient to his touch, so obedient that a rude hand or an unskilful finger may mar the whole work. . . .The first element we look for in ceramic beauty is form, a pure and graceful line; this must be regarded as of the greatest importance, because if the form be poor, no decoration, however eleaborate or costly, can ever beautify. . . . There can be no doubt that, though the origination of a work of art may be an inspiration, the ability to execute the same work is the outcome of severe study and long training. A high civilization had caused in Greece a high ideal; the works of the potter, as of the sculptor, were judged by a lofty standard, and for this reason the examples that remain to us exhibit such a high degree of excellence.[28]

His passion for perfection never slackened.

But if one only could, in the course of a lifetime of effort perhaps, produce even one thing which could live forever by virtue of its own intrinsic power and beauty—then it would be well worth while. I think, therefore, that the qualifications of a craftsman should be saturated with and dominated by idealism. In the best, and in nothing but the best, can satisfaction be found and no effort is too costly, no labor too severe to attain this end.[29]

His high vision must have inspired many students and his profoundly humanistic attitude toward his art is moving, as this unpublished passage concerning Robineau illustrates.

In one respect the work of the ceramist stands alone—it is this—in the arts of the clay and the fire the kiln always has the last word. Let us think what this means. The painter expresses his ideas on canvas or panel with color and brush. His work is finished when he lays down his palette. The sculptor may have his model produced in marble or bronze and he can see the final result, and likewise with other methods of expression. Not so the potter. With every care in the selection and preparation of materials; with the most refined skill in executing the design; with prolonged and exacting labor in the mixing and testing of glazes and colors the completed work must undergo the ordeal of the kiln. Homer, on behalf of the Greek potters, besought Pallas Athene, the Goddess of fire, to "protect their ovens," but notwithstanding long experience on the part of the fireman and the careful guidance of the presiding Genius there remains in the progress of the fire an element of chance which cannot be entirely eluded. Every part of the fiercely heated kiln is under a heavy strain and at the critical moment some part or prop may give way and the result is a slip and a ruinous collapse. And yet without this risk there could be no success or satisfaction. "The fire's the test, the crowning glory too." Knowing from the labors of a lifetime, the intricacies, the fascinations and the perils of the art of ceramic production the writer of these lines can accompany Adelaide Alsop-Robineau in spirit as she labors on, say, her splendid "Scarab Vase," working out the interlacing lines in the tender clay, laying on delicate touches of the glaze and, finally, having the piece—almost a part of her own flesh and blood—carefully carried and set within the kiln chamber where, without human protection, it must submit to the penetration of the searching flame by which alone it can be made immortal.[30]

In 1931, half gladly, half sadly, Binns retired from active directorship of the school and became a country gentleman of leisure with the most versatile tastes. On December 4, 1934, Charles Fergus Binns joined those "ransomed saints" whose lives he had loved and whose example he had followed all his life long.[31]

1. Charles F. Binns, "Fragments," *The Clay-Worker,* 41 (1904), p. 271.
2. Elsie Binns et al., "Charles Fergus Binns, 1857-1934," *Charles Fergus Binns Memorial, 1857-1934,* Alfred University Bulletin, no. 3 (November 1935), p. 7.

3. Alfred Archives. MC1, series III, folder 1. "Recollections," by Charles F. Binns, p. 5. New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.
4. Ibid., pp. 5–10.
5. John F. McMahon, "Charles Fergus Binns," *Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society,* 17 (April 1938), p. 174.
6. Alfred Archives. MC1, series I, box 31. Autobiography by Charles F. Binns. 1923.
7. Alfred Archives. MC1, series I, box 45. Binns to Theodore H. Pond, August 27, 1928.
8. Elsie Binns, "Binns," p. 8.
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10. Ross C. Purdy, "Address," *Alfred University Commencement, 1925.* (Albany: J.B. Lyon, Printers, 1925), p. 23.
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12. Alfred Archives. MC1, series III, folder 8a. Richard W. Binns to Charles F. Binns. 1899.
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17. Quoted in *China, Glass and Lamps,* 19 (May 24, 1900), p. 9.
18. Charles F. Binns, "E Concrematione Confirmatio," *Alfred University Commencement, 1925,* p. 4.
19. Binns to Pond.
20. Paul E. Cox, "Charles F. Binns—An Obituary," *Ceramic Industry,* 24 (January 1935), p. 19.
21. Alfred Archives. College of Ceramics—History file. History of college by Ted Randall, August 11, 1977.
22. Personal communication, 1982.
23. Charles F. Binns, "The Potter and His Wheel," *The Clay-Worker,* 53 (1910), p. 66.
24. Charles F. Binns, "Inspiration in Material," *Craftsman,* 5 (1903), p. 263.
25. Cox, "Binns," p. 19.
26. Ibid.
27. Alfred Archives. MC1, series II, box 2. "An Adventure in Discontent" by Charles F. Binns.
28. Charles F. Binns, "The Elements of Beauty in Ceramics," *Journal of the Society of Arts,* 42 (April 6, 1894), pp. 409–410.
29. Alfred Archives. MC1, series II, box 2. "Possibilities in Pottery" by Charles F. Binns.
30. Alfred Archives. MC1, series II, box 3. "Refined by Fire" by Charles F. Binns.
31. Elsie Binns, "Binns," pp. 10 and 14.

Susan R. Strong is art reference librarian and college archivist at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. The college archives, which are open to research and public use, contain the papers and correspondence of Charles Binns (from which this biography was drawn) and the college history, as well as the archives of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts. Strong is now at work preparing an annotated bibliography of the history of American ceramics.

Vase *(1929), 8½" (22 cm) high. Courtesy New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Photo: Paul Gignac.*

Exhibitions

Untitled *(1981), 40½" (103 cm) high. Courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco.*

Peter Voulkos

Joanne Burstein

It is difficult to find a discussion of Peter Voulkos's work that does not stress the apparent application of Abstract Expressionist principles to clay. Thirty years later, Abstract Expressionism has become an art "style," a "look," which may or may not have had much to do with the artist's intent or content at the time. There *was* a Jackson Pollock moment, when paint and canvas were suddenly freed of their historical burden, and in the work of Voulkos, Mason, and De Staebler, there was a similar moment for clay. But this shift in consciousness toward materials was in service to individual paths of exploration, not to commence a catalogue of drips, scrapes, slits, or gouges.

Peter Voulkos is not an Abstract Expressionist who redefined ceramics by applying expressionist principles to the medium. His importance to those in the field and to the understanding of the broader art audience is that he is a potter—a potter who became intrigued with what this material clay *is* and how its inherent properties could contribute to the vessel aesthetic. In his most recent and mature work, one sees the culmination of thirty years of dialogue between Voulkos and clay and two primary vessel forms.

In his retrospective exhibition of 1979, the clear message of his early work was how much he experimented. There were little Zen bowls, assemblages of thrown cylinders, anthropomorphic sculptures; works were painted, glazed, left bare. He seemed to search each form for some answer, some note that rang true. In clay, it seems there were two answers: the narrow-necked bottle and the plate. His constructivist sculptures took him out of clay and into monumental bronzes.

The bottle is the classic form of containment, technically and spiritually. The plate is the classic form of offering. If the full vocabulary of functional ceramics was paired down to its opposing, least common denominators, it would leave these two forms. Every consideration of functional clay forms exists in the extremes of plate rim to bottle mouth, open convex surface to enclosed concave volume. In his concern with these two polarities, the consistent points of Voulkos's expoloration are the large, nonfunctional scale and the texture of clay.

A few years ago, the bottle vessels were the more scarred and broken of the two forms. Here, they are the more "manmade," gouged and scarred for sure, but with more surface integrity. All have mantles of golden brown ash glaze, natural to wood firing. Their scale—three to four feet in height—has led to much discussion of the mechanics—how does one throw so large?—which leads to the dead-end issue of bravado. It seems they are consistently this scale because of their anthropomorphic relationship to the human torso and neck. The potter's vocabulary of neck, shoulder, belly, or body becomes explicit in its one-to-one relationship to the viewer.

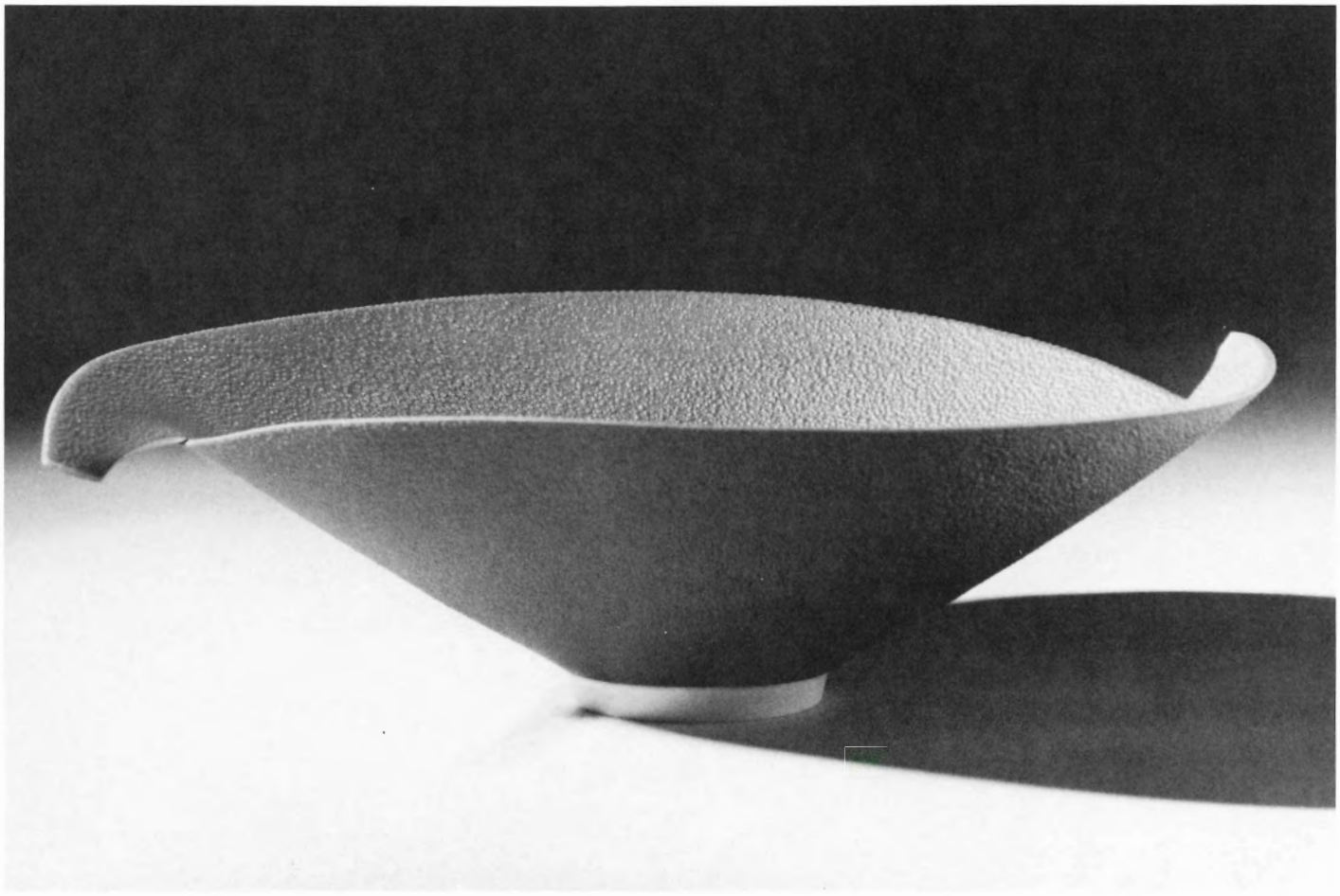
The plates, on the other hand, have evolved from elegantly refined design—the just-so wads of porcelain, the graphic line—sculpted paintings in clay. Now, it is the plates that are disintegrating, encrusted with unrefracted ash like remnants of a long-destroyed civilization. They are punctuated by varying degrees of pushes, cuts, and tears, yet almost all have a triangle sgraffitoed into their surfaces. In this, they remind me strongly of the recent *Teotihuacán Series* (oil stick on paper) by Jim Melchert. He repeated the geometric pattern of a stepped pyramid to honor graphically the act of climbing the Sun Pyramid in Mexico City. The repetition of the triangle on these plates seems a similar reiteration of a strong, even mythic image. It also reminds one that the acceptance of graphic series work parallels that of clay. Series work is inherent to much of clay, yet that aspect has been previously resisted by an artworld trained to expect the unique and changing imagery of painting.

There are subtle aesthetic and universally human variations developing in Voulkos's work—evidence of that union between the artist and his material that is true of all good art. Peter Voulkos's prominence in the field as promoter and teacher, his prolific production, and his personal charisma threaten to focus attention on the mythic aspects of the man. The artworld has already gone too far in its tendency to bury its artists while they are still alive, while their work is in evolution. It is far easier to count gouges and slashes than it is to really stand before the work and appreciate its unique beauty and power.

The work reviewed here was seen at Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco, in February; this winter new work will be shown at Charles Cowles Gallery, New York.

Elsa Rady

Joanne Burstein



No essential difference exists between the artist and the craftsman, the artist is a craftsman of heightened awareness. . . . But the basis of craftsmanship is indispensible to all artists. It is the prime source of all creative work.
Walter Gropius
Weimar Bauhaus Manifesto

The vessel in clay has a coherent history going back thousands of years. It has expressed the highest artistic achievements of several cultures—Chinese, Japanese, American Indian, classical Greek—to mention the obvious ones. For American ceramists, belief in the values and aesthetic of craftsmanship has been so pervasive and so little recognized as to be a perverse form of Avant-Gardism. The Chinese and Japanese traditions figured prominently in the work of Glen Lukens's and Peter Voulkos's generations, while younger artists call on more recent antecedents. The work of Elsa Rady is its own unique answer to the issues raised by the Bauhaus group.

Is there a perfect formal solution to a functional form, a no-frills modernism of carefully considered design? Rady's bowls speak elegantly to this aesthetic. They have the precision associated with fine machines and the rigorous intelligence of an unerring eye. They are based in fine craftsmanship, the kind which attends to every detail while observing the coherence of the whole.

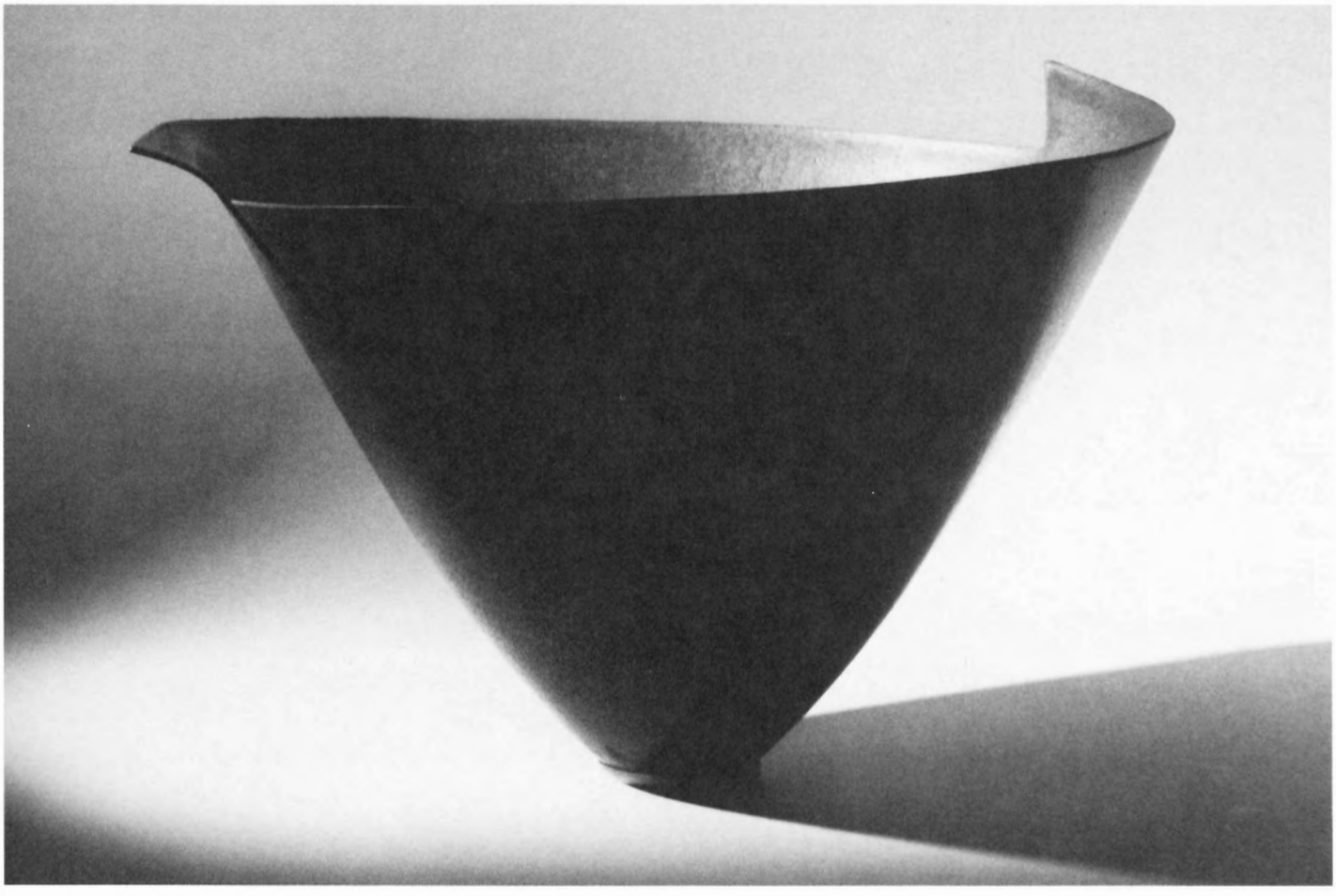
The form is very specific—a gently widening bowl rising from a very narrow base to a receptive rim. The rims, her masterstroke of invention, are dynamically cut in subtle linear design, injecting power and movement into the stable bowl form. The resulting silhouette is designed to balance, while activating, the internal volume. Each piece is a unique and unrepeatable solution to the subtle differences in each thrown form. In the perfection of their design, these bowls could be any size, but their modest five to ten inches in height is intense and honest in its appropriateness to functional scale.

The oft-stated failing of Bauhaus functional design was that the high level of perfection and the resulting human involvement never allowed the prototypes to be efficiently mass produced by machine. While Rady's work is clearly inspired by the Bauhaus spirit of unadorned, comprehensive design, her solutions are founded in the carefully conceived and executed craftsmanship of each piece. The porcelain is fired to its maximum, cone 11 (about 2360°F), the throwing and trimming are impeccable, and the range of glazes (six in this show) is broad enough to explore the interaction of color and form, while narrow enough to be an explicit statement of personal taste.

Rady uses matt glazes just close enough to being glossy to give

Cobalt Blue Bowl *(1982), 3⅛" x 11¾" (8 x 30 cm). Courtesy Janus Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Bob Lopez.*

Black Bowl *(1982), 7" x 10¾" (18 x 27 cm). Courtesy Janus Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Bob Lopez.*

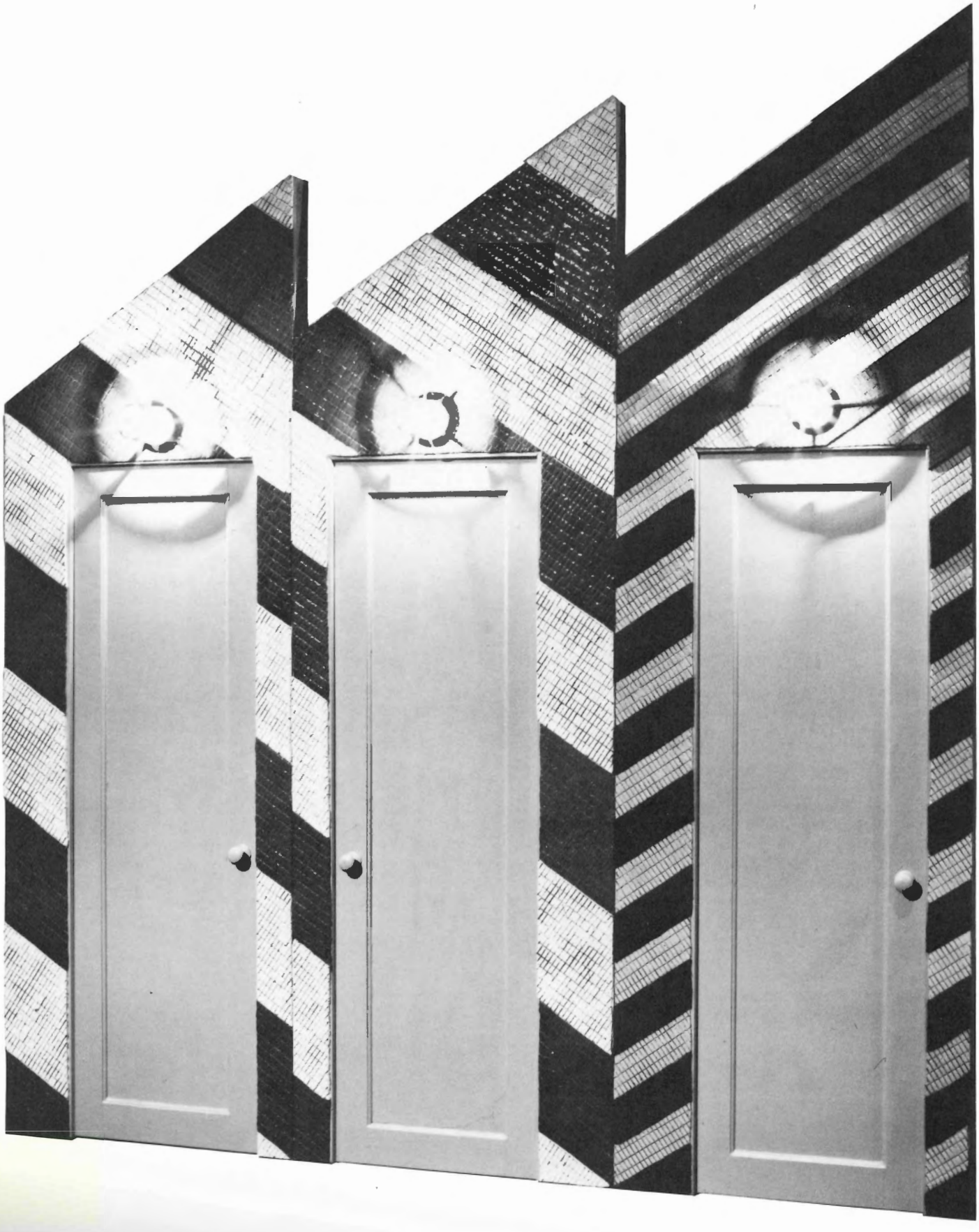


them luster without losing the soft solidness of a crystalline surface. The colors—gray, black, forest green, lavender blue, dark electric blue—are saturated, dense, and opaque. They are reminiscent of California studio work of the forties, yet totally themselves in this context. The one exception is her copper red. An unpredictable glaze in its proportion of red to white, as used by many ceramists, it too often overpowers form or is deliberately used to draw attention away from poorly executed work. That is not the case here; the color proportions are as balanced and as appropriate as every other aspect of the work. One can only attribute this to scrupulous editing after firing on Rady's part. Rady's work is becoming increasingly complex and subtle in design. Several of the bowls (in proportion, higher than they are wide) are breathtaking in the success of their many-angled rims. Compared to earlier work, this sophisticated geometry borders on the decorative, yet is solidly grounded in classic shapes. The relative failure of two low bowls (almost plates) demonstrates the perils of only a gentle shift in proportion: Rady's compositional dynamic is contingent upon the viewer's ability to simultaneously see interior and exterior and the linear relationship of foot to rim. This is not an artist being seduced by the cult of the new, but one developing with deliberate patience within specific dimensions. As she works through the complexities of her circumscribed issue, craft and art are united in a major contribution to the abolishment of what Gropius called "the arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist."

One hopes that the recognition now coming from the artworld at large to the work of Elsa Rady and other clay artists will result in an acceptance of a single issue, fully developed, as the difficult and rewarding exploration that it is. This is an understanding necessary to an appreciation of any art form. Nor should the craftsmanship demanded by clay be an impediment to its appreciation. In an environment now bereft of any form of craftsmanship, the symptomatic hunger for anything with the clear touch of the human hand and mind may be the beginning of just such an appreciation and understanding.

Elsa Rady's porcelain vessels have been the subject of solo exhibitions at Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, at Quay Gallery, San Francisco, and most recently at Impressions Gallery, Boston (May 1–29, 1982).

The Past Again, Entered Through Another Gate *(1981), 120" x 109" x 42" (305 x 277 x 107 cm).*



Joseph Mannino

Judith Dunham

From the imitation marble panels and ersatz tiling to the doors that don't open—or, when they do, lead nowhere—Joseph Mannino's ceramic sculptures are reminiscent of stage sets. In using artifice to create an impression of realism, they try to disguise the calculation necessary for the former behind the off-handed appearance borrowed from the latter. A pitfall of this humble, nearly trompe l'oeil veracity is that it tends to be much too serious and to look belabored. But judging by the direction of this most recent work, a subtle whimsicality is beginning to leaven and relax the rigidity of Mannino's architectural evocations.

Considering the subject and spirit of Mannino's work, it is fitting that his three large-scale pieces were exhibited under the collective title "Follies and Façades." Although clay is the primary material in these and past works, Mannino is more interested in investigating architectural structures and functions, and their metaphoric possibilities, than he is in addressing specific aspects of ceramic tradition.

As the show's title indicates, the key idea behind these three recent pieces is the façade. While the architectural façade traditionally provides a foil for the building behind it, Mannino's façades stand alone. The newest works, *The Past Again, Entered through Another Gate* and *One Way or Another,* conceal only the wood scaffolding that supports them. Averaging ten feet tall, they look like fragments of walls transplanted from a construction site. Inset with old wooden doors, and in one instance with a small window, and detailed with simulated tile, these architectural extractions have all the anonymity of exit doors onto an alleyway.

Rock 'n' Roll, the earliest piece in the show, and the one that emphasizes formalism over playfulness, exploits the concept of façade, rather than conforming to its strict architectural definition. Like figures in a lineup, the four, massive, eight-foot columns of this work stand side by side, leaning slightly left or right. Although initially seeming to be complete cylinders, these stacks of individually made, curved bricks are actually cross sections of columns meant to be seen from both sides. The convex fronts of these semi-circles play the role of façades to their backsides, whose concavities are each colored with a brilliant monochromatic glaze. Imprinted by hand on the bricks is the sequence of numbers Mannino used to reconstruct the pieces after the modules were completed, and chose to leave visible in order to articulate the surface.

A façade is to a building as a mask is to a face; accordingly, Mannino invests considerable attention in detailing the surfaces of the pieces. The verticals and horizontals basic to the language of building are counterpointed by diagonals: the zigzag patterns added to the raw clay fronts of *Rock 'n' Roll,* the striped glazing of the tiled wall in *The Past Again,* and the sloped or stepped profiles along the tops of the façades. To create the false tiles, conventional concrete screen and stucco mesh were used to lay up the clay before firing. Once in the kiln, the wire burned out to leave a rich pattern that looks cracked and worn as if over time. The found doors incorporated into the works were first carefully altered so that they are narrower and their knobs lower than one would expect—an oddly disconcerting effect that is discovered only by walking up to them.

Whether the result of these details or of the imposing overall scale, Mannino's current façades truly involve the viewer, in contrast to the aloofness of his earlier work. The curved half-columns of *Rock 'n' Roll* are just wide and deep enough to accommodate the standing human figure. The doors of the façades, though reduced slightly from life-size, invite one to open them. It is only the far right door of *The Past Again,* however, that yields to pressure, allowing the spectator to pass through it or, as Mannino says, to puncture the plane of the sculpture. More than that, the functioning doorway subverts the fastidiousness of the work, making it less of a precious object. With the blazing lights above each door and the alternating bands of yellow and black or red and white glazes, this piece is, to its credit, as much of a folly as it is a façade.

"Follies and Façades" was exhibited at the E.B. Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California (January 9–February 21, 1982).

Judith Dunham, a writer living in San Francisco, is associate director of the World Print Council. She is currently co-writing a book on Bay Area art, funded by an Art Critic's Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Patrick Horsley

Louise Klemperer

We may divide potters whose work begins on the wheel into three general groups. First, there are those who have taken the Bauhaus dictum of form-follows-function to heart and whose pots, while well conceived to fulfill functional reuirements, seem to succeed visually, when they do, more or less by accident. Second, there are those who use function as an outer parameter and then pursue form as an end in itself within this parameter—the vessel-makers. Robert Rutner's work of the 1960s and the current work of Val Cushing come to mind. The third category is distinguished by work in which the image of the vessel is retained, but function is no longer a consideration—the makers of metaphorical vessels. Turner's current work and Paul Soldner's are exemplary.

Patrick Horsley's introduction to clay occurred a decade ago at the Portland Art Museum School, where all functional forms had to be justified aesthetically—a vessel orientation. It wasn't until after graduation, and faced with earning a living, that Horsley joined Portland's mainstream of production potters (most of whom are members of my first category). Or perhaps he only joined them to the extent that he made work in multiples; this show pointed out some outstanding differences, both in his present and past work. An NEA Craftsman Fellowship in 1980 encouraged him to further develop his longstanding vessel concerns and also to extend them into metaphorical vessels.

At Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Horsley exhibited the following: two kinds of covered jars, some low with faceted sides and a gently rising lid, others taller with straight sides; square wall plaques, each with a thrown spiral in its center and additions of various small three-dimensional shapes; oversize footed teabowls topped by clay arches and thin clay coils; and oval, trapezoid forms capped by thick arches and further adorned with tiny geometric shapes. Covering all these are dry matt glazes of blue, yellow green, rust, sand, and brown.

Seeing such a large body of work brought the surprising realization that the similarities between his functional and nonfunctional pots outweigh their differences. The pots in this exhibit share glaze treatment, similar formal devices, and, whether functional or not, a vessel orientation.

Even with this orientation, however, Horsley's recent forms are not always resolved and at times he does not take his ideas far enough. Least successful are the wall plaques, which appear to derive from the trivet. Most seem to be merely that—trivets hung on a wall, with inexplicable pyramids and squiggles added for decoration. One succeeds. Here the visually unrelated forms coalesce into a narrative—an aerial view of a rust- and sand-colored Egyptian landscape, where ancient pyramids sit beside a spiral earthwork in the desert.

The oversize teabowls, like the plaques, are too often an unconvincing assemblage of parts. Each part is interesting in itself, but there seems to be no logic for their coming together in this particular way. Even so, the linear coils atop the arcs of these teabowls seem to soar in free flight.

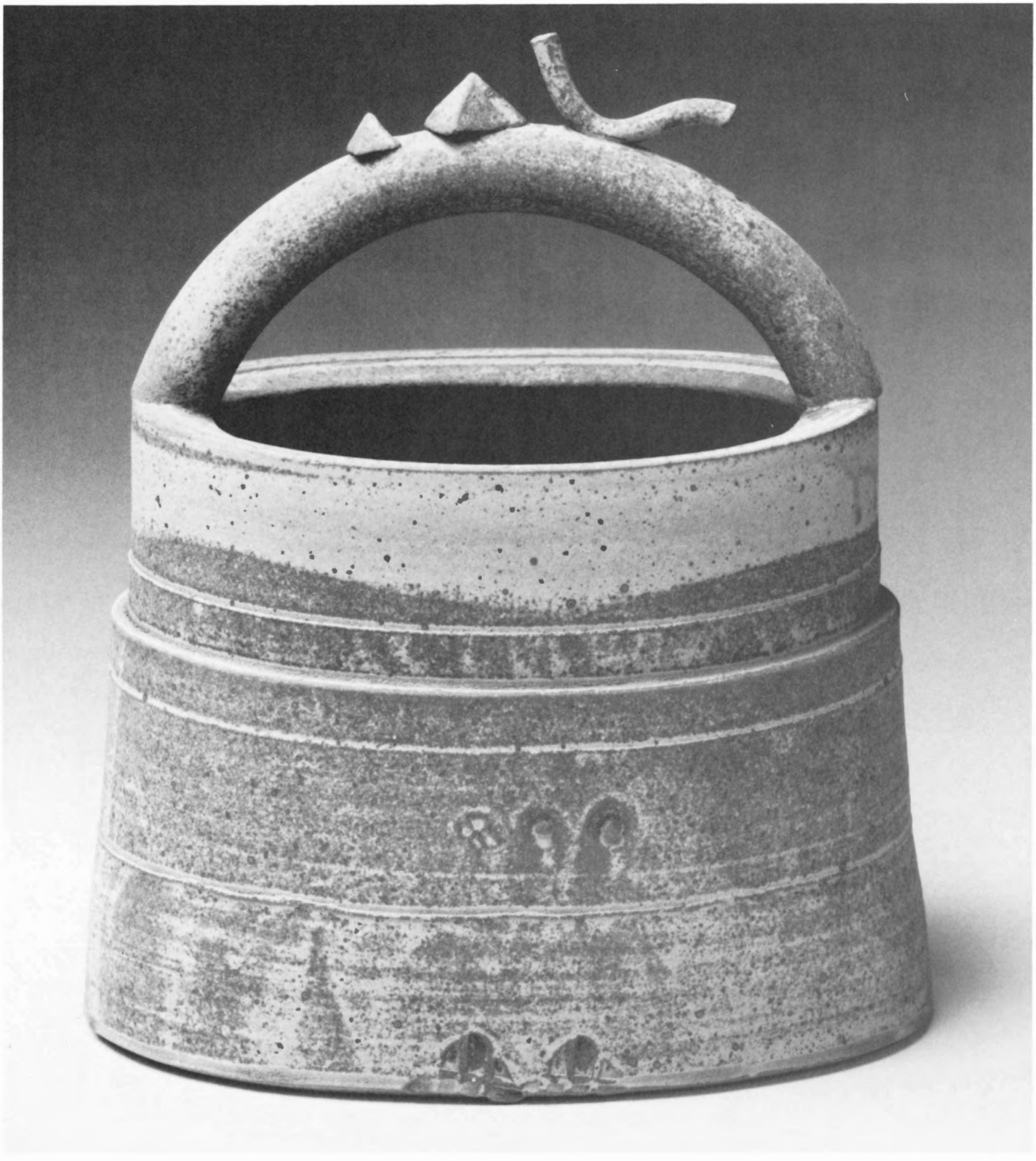
It is with his newest forms—the oval, trapezoid jars—that Horsley has really arrived. The elements of these all cohere into an integral image, while creating a series of contrasts and seeming contradictions that give this work an edge. The tiny geometric figures that ride on top of the archlike handles make the jar forms seem monumental in scale; these figures teeter on the edge of balance while the pots beneath stand firm and rooted to the earth. By altering the thrown pot bodies to a narrow oval, they become somewhat two dimensional, while the small pyramids, squiggles, and tubes attached to them remain full bodied, three dimensional. The pots' oval shape is a further puzzle: the off-center oval, after all, is not the natural product of throwing on the wheel, yet the evidence of their making, the throwing lines, are still visible inside. Puzzling, too, is their similarity to baskets, while obviously not being baskets or even being "about" baskets.

Patrick Horsley's ceramics are not on the outer edge of America's avant-garde and, furthermore, not all pieces are successful. But they do reveal an artist pushing at his own edge, expanding his vision. And the best of these pots have a timeless presence that would be recognized anywhere.

Ceramics by Patrick Horsley were seen at Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Portland, Oregon (February 18–March 20) and at Bush Barn Gallery, Salem, Oregon (May 28–June 25, 1982).

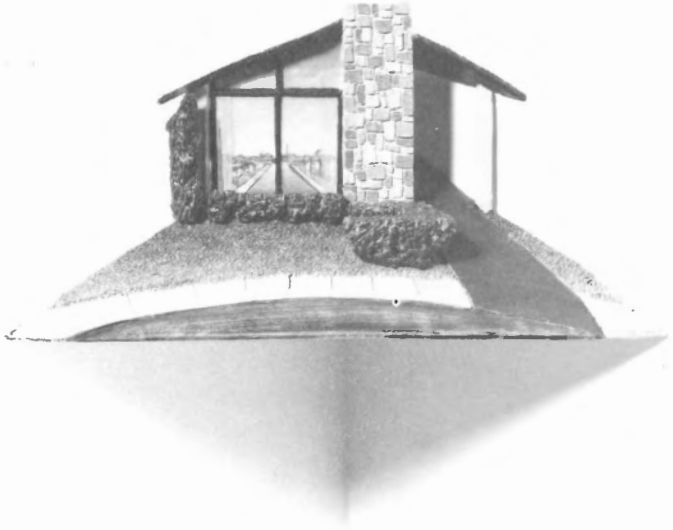
Louise Klemperer writes on art for Fresh Weekly *and lives in Portland, Oregon.*

Untitled *(1982), 11″ (28 cm) high.*
Photo: Rick Paulson.



Gifford Myers

Ed Forde



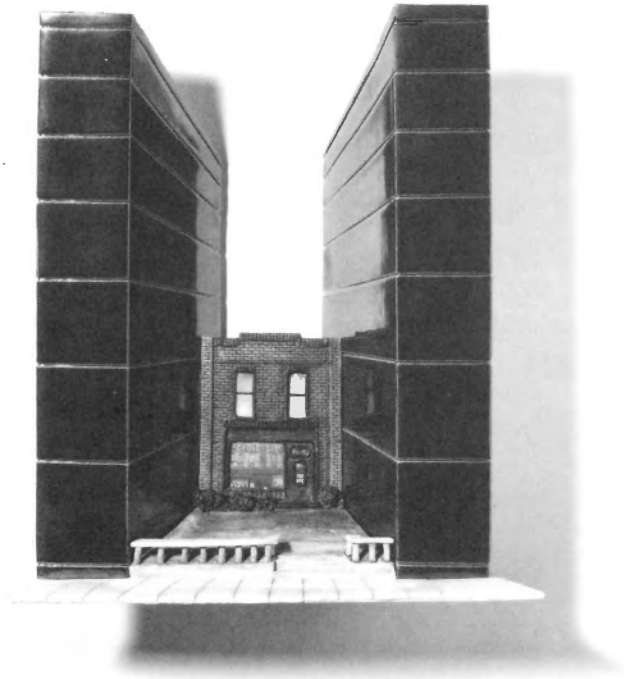
One of the biggest problems of contemporary life is finding an affordable place to live. The house, that structure that once served as the center of family life, has become an investment commodity, a depersonalized object of greed and speculation. This recent appreciation in property values has politicized residential housing. Poor people are evicted for redevelopment, tenants fight for rent control, and younger generations will never qualify to own modest homes like the ones they grew up in. The American Dream is tarnished by the realities of modern economics; the American home, like the large American car, has become a financial impossibility. This issue provides the focus for the *Real Estart* series by Gifford Myers.

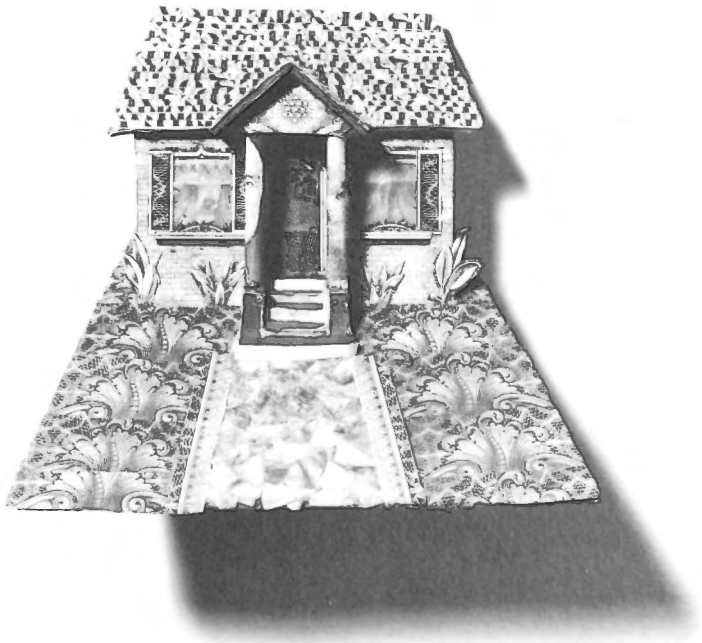
Real Estart is a diverse collection of houses and buildings exhibited as wallworks. They are *very* small—only two to four inches square in profile—and they are both two and three dimensional, with aspects of perspective and illusion presented in a center-imagist format similar to modern painting. On this tiny scale, the detailing becomes almost obsessive, with windows, bricks, and shrubbery barely larger than if depicted on a postage stamp. The windows of several houses show reflections of neighboring buildings, which add essential meanings to the imagery; but these windows are visually smaller than one's littlest finger nail. This ironic device of small scale physically draws the viewer in, almost to a point of finite disappearance.

Houses are the largest elements in our lives, physically and financially (just as architecture is the largest of manmade artworks), and the major financial responsibility most people undertake in their lifetimes. Further, shelter is critical to human survival. Myers has gleaned this subject out of the mass of contemporary problems to articulate its gargantuan importance in inverse proportion. He has made the biggest human construction small enough to put in your pocket. Psychological analysis teaches us that an initial approach to personal problems is the development of perspective. Myers's strategy of miniaturization likewise helps us to focus on these issues and reëxamine our viewpoints and values.

All of the works in the *Real Estart* series represent residential property: houses, apartment buildings, and noncommercial storefronts. They are about living and human habitation, not selling or services. Myers recognizes our reverence for the home and draws clear distinctions between residential and service architecture. The images derive straight from the vernacular of real-estate agents, with such titles as *Country Living/City Location.* The titles and images paraphrase the bitter realities of today's housing market. *N.F.S.* shows a small old building sandwiched between two menancing high-rise towers—holdout to the "progress" of modern redevelopment. *Hedge* offers a small bungalow completely patterned with cut-up sections of real five-dollar bills. Myers's equation of housing with commodity speculation is blatant and effective. Such overt political and socioeconomic statements might seem excessive, but their depiction in such precious scale and detail tempers these images with a delicate subtlety.

Myers takes advantage of the breadth of his subject matter to address qualities of architectural regionalism. *Spanish Gold* and *Contempo w/pool* are archetypical southern California houses. Perhaps no other artist since David Hockney has succeeded in so capturing the ambiance of the California urban landscape. *Foggybottom* and *Capitol Hill/Capital Gains* comment on property in the Washington, D.C., area. Given the wealth of our collective national architecture, the artist could forever mine the abundance of regional styles and characteristics, but style is not Myers's true





interest. Rather, such geographic variety proves how pervasive are such problems as housing shortages and property speculation. (One suspects Myers could extend his subject to international examples and remain within the political consistency of his concepts.)

These allusions to regional style enhance decorative elements of form, color, and detail and Myers occasionally diverts from the political context of his images to comment on art and architecture. *Neo Classic w/Formal Garden* is his homage to new expressionist figurative painting. A background perspective with Italian cypress trees and a purple Roman railing frame a garish, reflected sunset—a la the school of Jed Garet. Other pieces flirt with tendencies of reductivist methodology in transforming the images into more neutral, geometric figures. Myers is first an artist, after all, who cannot resist the temptation to indulge his aesthetic talents.

The *Real Estart* series boldly discusses socioeconomic issues in an art form. And while Futurism and Dadaism popularized art as strategy and, in some cases, political posturing as art, the refined craftsmanship of Myers's images discourages any criticism of his work as economic propaganda. Temporal politics usually consume an artwork by subverting its aesthetic considerations to some larger philosophical context. Gifford Myers's work transcends such difficulties through its sublime scale and detail. This series sustains the maxim that a whisper is more persuasive than a shout.

The Real Estart *series has been the subject of two solo exhibitions—at Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1981 and at McIntosh/Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C. (March 6–April 1)—and was included in "Microcosms from California" at Siegel Contemporary Art, New York (April 14–May 8, 1982).*

Ed Forde is an artist and writer who teaches at California State University, Los Angeles.

Cul-de-sac *(1982), 2½" x 4½" x 3" (6.3 x 11.4 x 7.6 cm).*

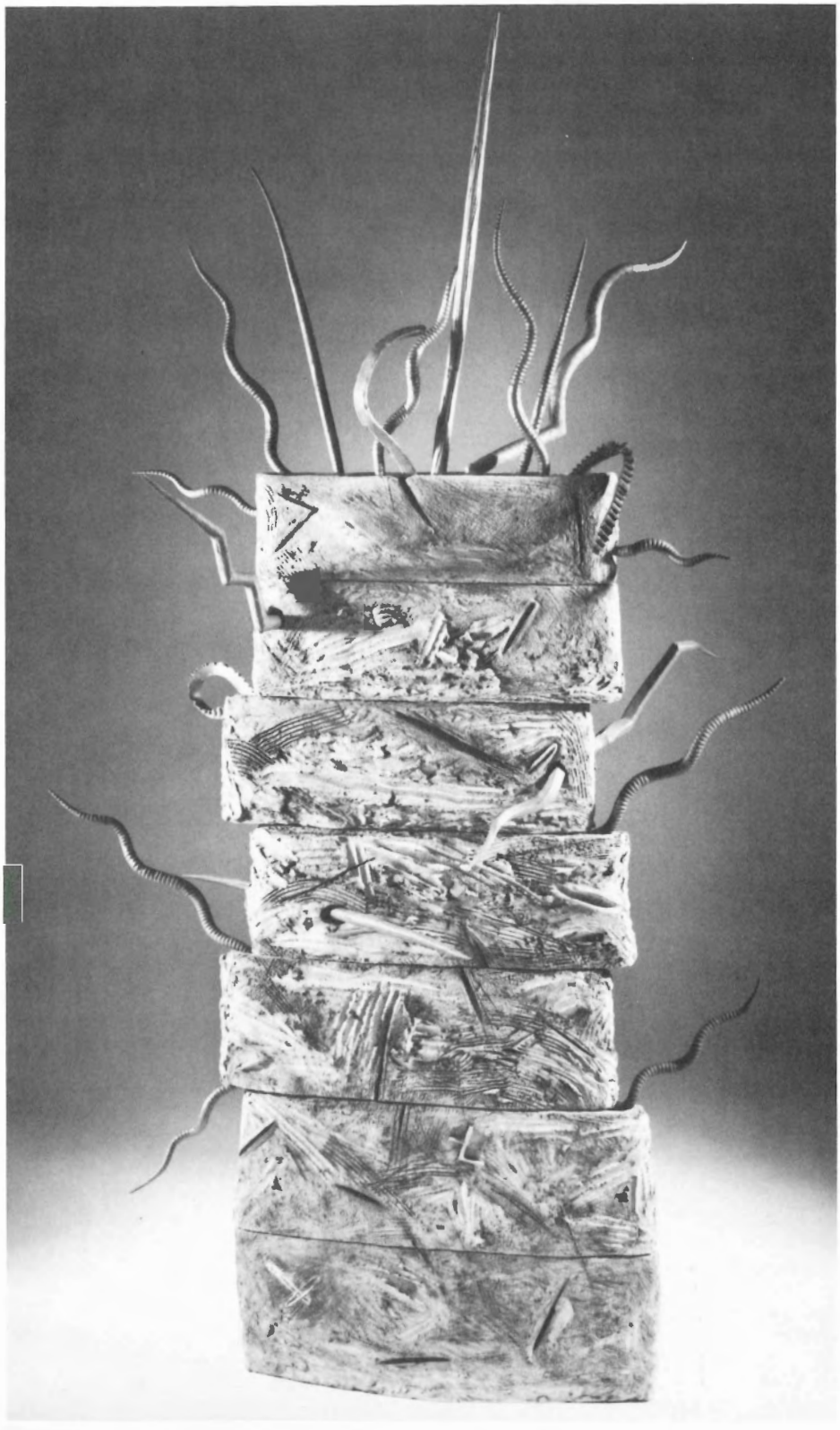
X1nt. Loc./Upper Brackets *(1982), 4" x 4½" x 2½" (10.2 x 11.4 x 6.3 cm).*

N.F.S. *(1982), 8" x 7" x 3" (20.3 x 17.8 x 7.6 cm).*

Hedge *(1981), 3" x 2½" x 2½" (7.6 x 6.3 x 6.3 cm). Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio.*

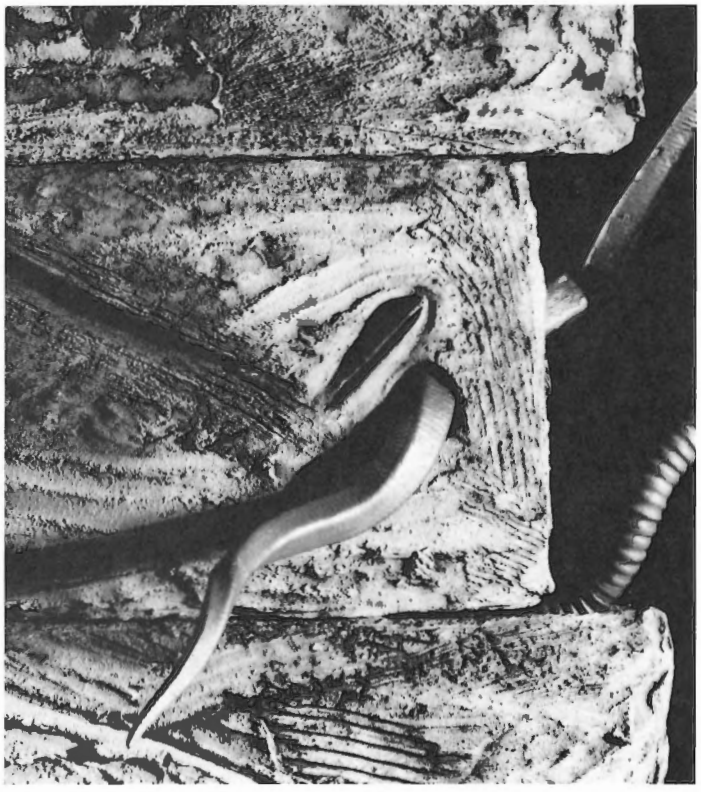
Untitled *(1981), 76" (193 cm) high. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Doug Long.*

(Opposite page) Detail. Photo: Doug Long.



Judy Moonelis

Judith Stein



At just under thirty years of age, Judy Moonelis is one of the most original ceramic artists working today. Trained at the Tyler School of Art and Alfred University, Moonelis has staked her aesthetic territory among "opposing elements and their subtle connections." For the past two years, her body of work has built on this vision of opposites in a sure and unconventional way.

As a foil for the mass and sensuality of the large slabs of earthenware that form the primary element of most of her pieces, Moonelis will introduce objects which are small, wiry, and prickly. Vertical sculptures may be knifed with silverware. Fork tines blare from the surface, their rigid stripes marking a sharp contrast with the relaxed fluting of the extruded clay. At times, metal and clay will buckle and dip sympathetically, as if to demonstrate that they are subject to the same influences. By impaling crackerlike fragments on a few protruding blades, Moonelis evokes gustatorial pleasures while feeding us a tidbit of quirky narrative.

Another group of recent work incorporates vintage dish shards. While there is certainly a self-referencing, art-about-art dimension to this recycling, the stronger impression is of their formal properties. Moonelis chooses her shapes and colors thoughtfully, embedding sharp-edged fragments of glossy green saucers in the flanks of a matt lilac footed form. One of the others in this series called to mind an insect who attached odd bits of leaves to its body for the purpose of either camouflage or mating, two diametrically opposed activities. At the top of the central core, the plain and pocked surface of the clay split to reveal a secret interior, colored with warm-hued tones.

Allusive and ambiguous, Moonelis's structures look backward and forward, directing us, for example, toward the Mesolithic and *Star Wars* for visual analogies to her personal iconography. Her richly scarified stelae are infused with the magic and energy of early art, which often recorded the press and shape of the maker's hand on surfaces grazed and pitted by arrows. The stain of darker pigments often outlines the deeper rents, as if these ancient wounds had once been attended by shamans.

Prophesying a belligerent future, a panoply of projectiles and probes are attached to each work. At once offensive and defensive, these horned tentacles snake in and out of fissures in the clay. Ribbed or sgraffitoed, straight or spiraled, these brassy, inquisitive shoots are colored with bright metallic powders and stand out from the neutral earth tones of the core.

Moonelis has an uncommon skill in creating works that seem both old and new, organic and inorganic. Her ceramic sculptures chasten with dark hints of a world out of control, peopled by sentient and vulnerable artifacts which are, in retrospect, all too human.

Judy Moonelis's sculptures were most recently featured at Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia (October 13-November 7, 1981) and examples are included in "Ancient Inspirations/Contemporary Interpretations" organized by Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences, Binghampton, New York (July 31-October 31, 1982).

Judith Stein is the Arts Reviewer for National Public Radio in Philadelphia (WUHY), and the Coordinator of the Morris Gallery for Contemporary Art in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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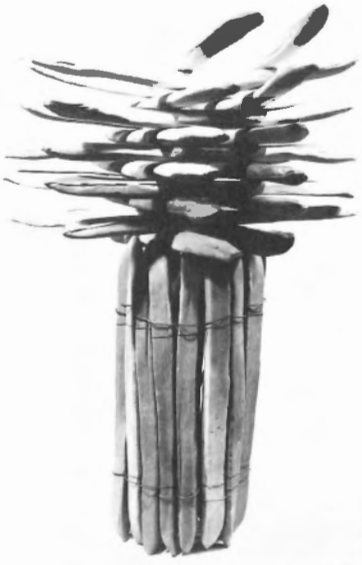

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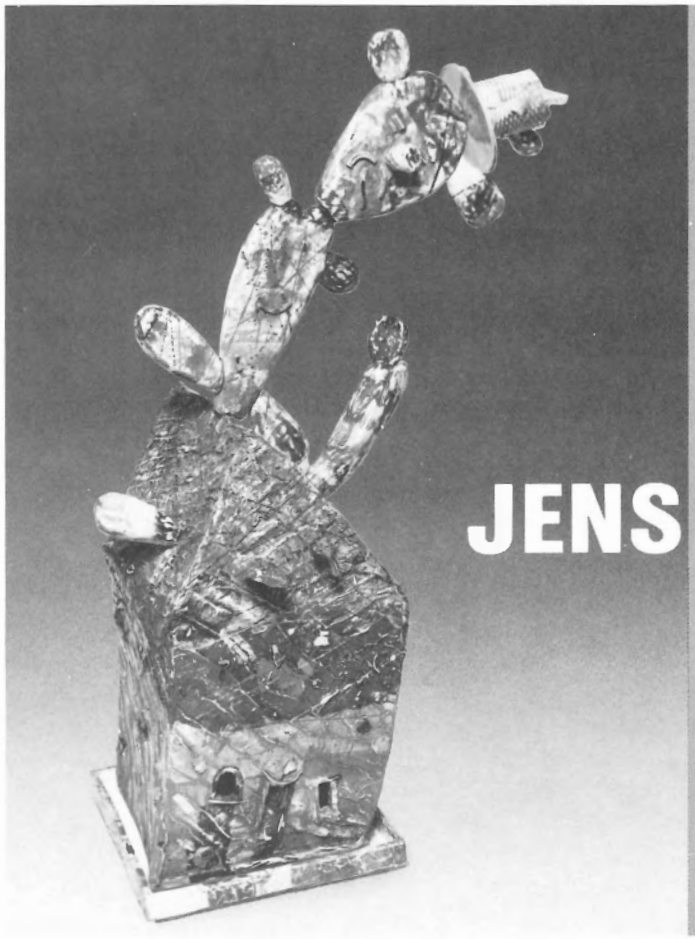

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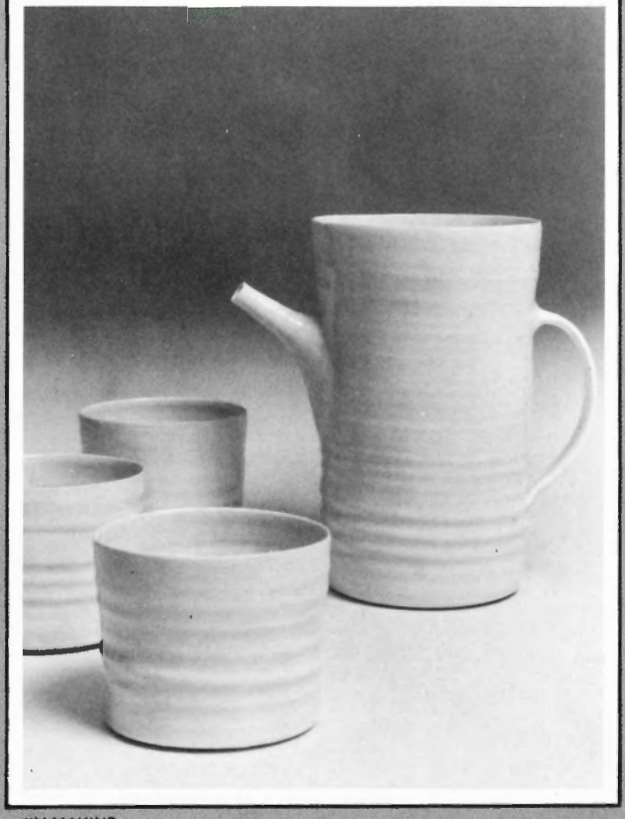

JIM MAKINS

1982-1983 SCHEDULE OF SHOWS

SEPTEMBER 12	WOMEN'S SHOW: BELLOWS, HAFNER WOODMAN AND OTHERS.
OCTOBER 10	DON PILCHER
NOVEMBER 14	JIM MAKINS
JANUARY 16	LOW-FIRE CERAMICS: BACERRA, DILLINGHAM, MIZUNO AND OTHERS.
MARCH 13	JUDITH SALOMON
APRIL 17	ROBERT FORBES
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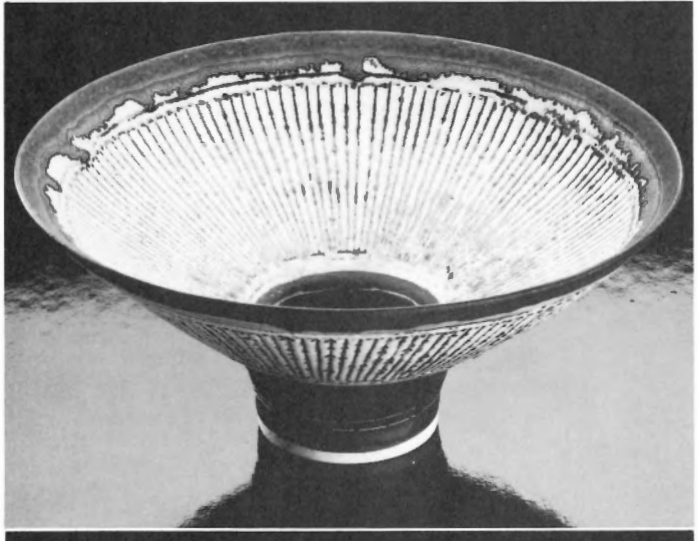

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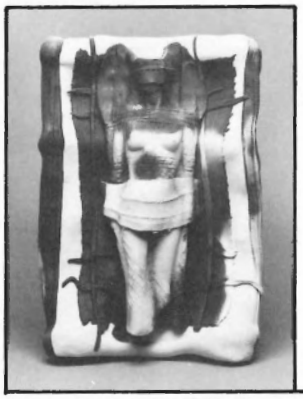

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SUSAN ECKENWALDER
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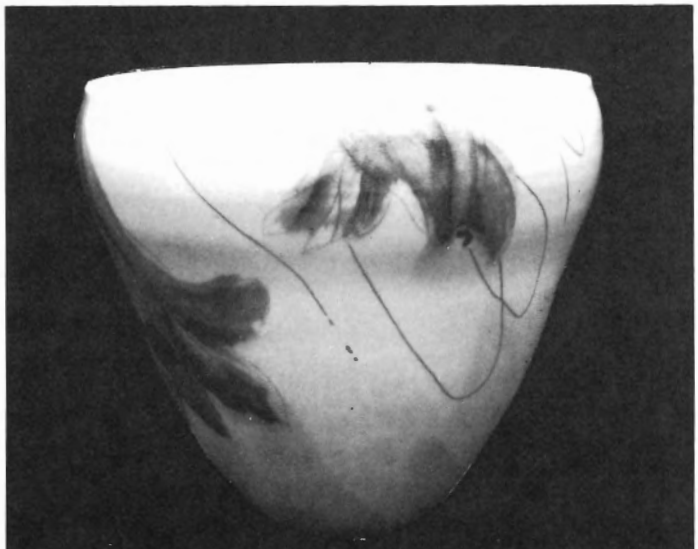

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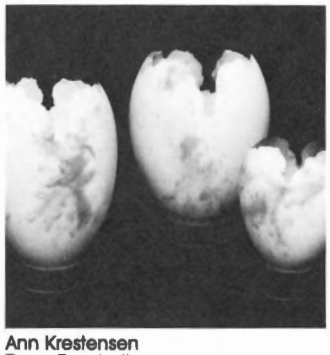

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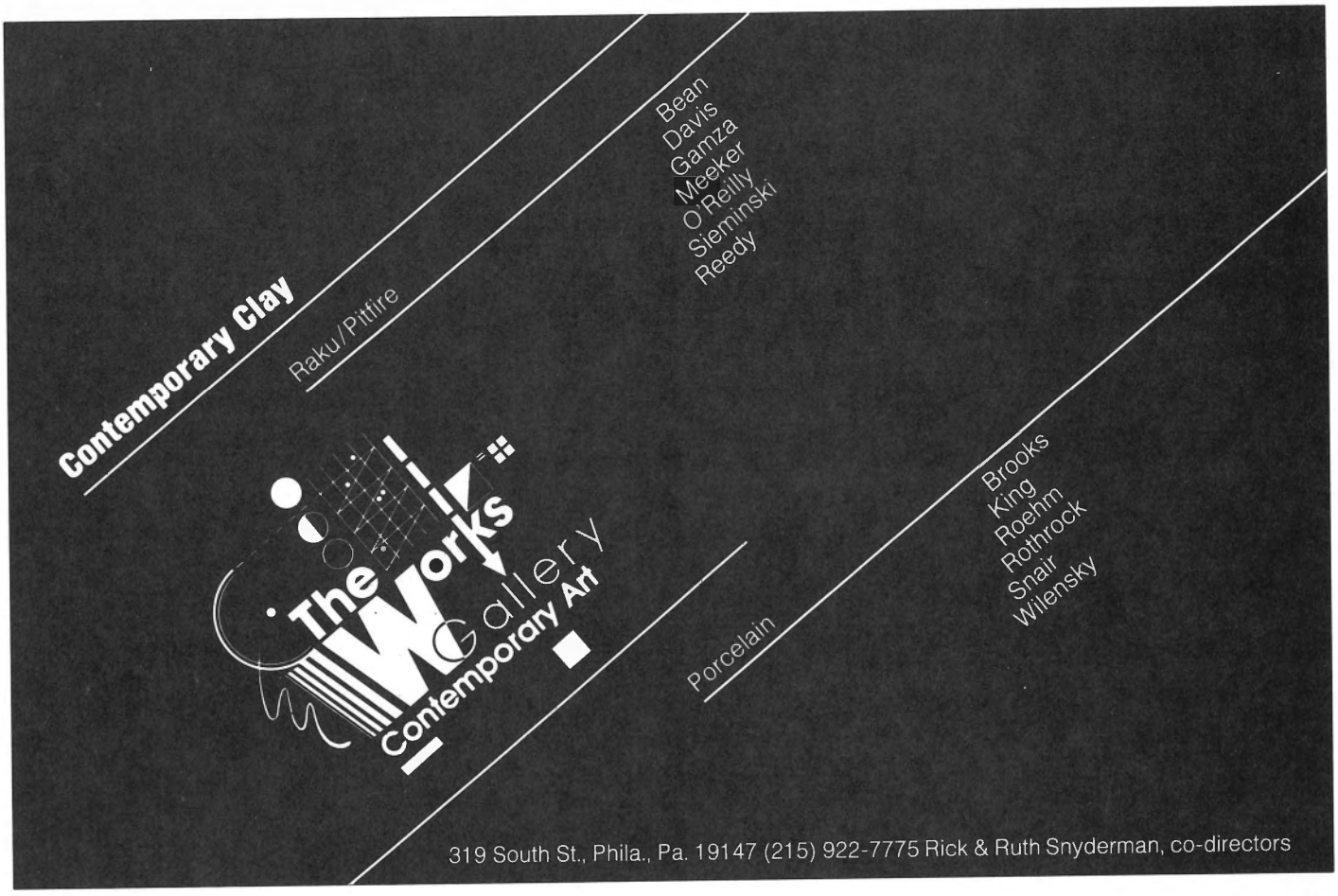

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